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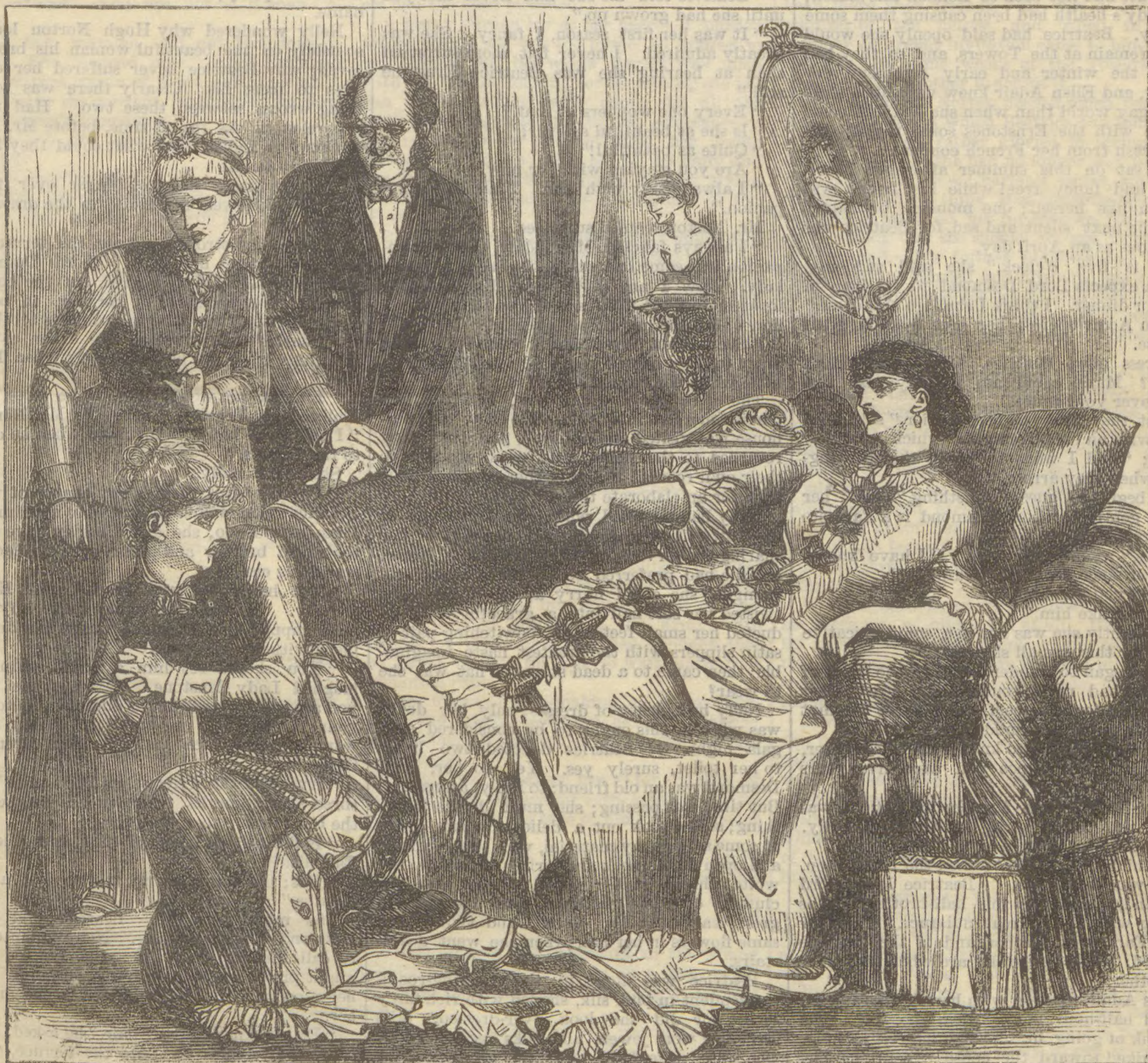
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"HER GRATITUDE IS SHOWN BY TRYING TO TAKE MY LIFE!"

Beatrice, the Beautiful; or, His Second Love.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEETING.

"Where more is meant than meets the ear."

BEATRICE ERNSTONE, the only child of that noble house, was two-and-twenty; a woman whose face once seen could never be forgotten. Above middle height, her figure of the Cleopatan style, and beautifully molded

as ever was the Egyptian Queen's. Masses of blue-black hair rolled back from her stately head, faultlessly regular features, a pair of splendid lustrous black eyes. Such were the charms of the young heiress. She had been the belle of three London seasons, had received more offers than she cared to count, and yet at twenty-two was not only disengaged, but her parents and friends confessed likely to remain so; it seemed as though the stately beauty had formed for herself an ideal difficult to realize.

Her companion, Ellen Adair, was three years her junior, and looked even younger than that. More of a child than a woman looked the pretty girl who, more than six months before, had been glad to accept the arduous post of companion to Miss Ernstone.

And she was treated at the Towers with great kindness by all; there were no slights or imagined wrongs to put up with. Lord and Lady

Ernstone never forgot that Nelly Adair was the only child of a loyal and true gentleman. Wherever Beatrice went Ellen went too, and the Baroness would have selected her *trousseau* with a care and pleasure second only to that with which she would have fulfilled the task for her own beautiful, capricious child.

Ellen was very happy at the Towers. She loved Beatrice as a sister, and never dreamed of being so much as thought of when that young lady was present. A great contrast she to the heiress. A slight, fragile-looking creature, with nut-brown hair, large blue eyes, a face without a single feature which would have escaped a sculptor's criticism, but yet with a charm all its own; a pure, delicate complexion, which had borrowed the bloom of the wild rose, and a sweet, clear voice,—these formed all Miss Adair's dower.

The two girls sat side by side on a rustic bench. It was the month of July, but the Ernstons had not been to London this season; my lady's health had been causing them some anxiety. Beatrice had said openly she would rather remain at the Towers, and so they had passed the winter and early summer very quietly, and Ellen Adair knew very little more of the gay world than when she had first come to live with the Ernstons some months before, fresh from her French convent.

She sat on this summer afternoon heart-whole and fancy free! while her friend was quite unlike herself; one moment brilliantly gay, the next silent and sad, for Beatrice was capricious as an April day.

"It is five o'clock," she said suddenly. "Papa expects Lord Desmond to be here in time for dinner. I think I shall go and dress."

Ellen Adair opened her blue eyes in great surprise.

"Dress now, Beatrice, for seven o'clock dinner? Marie could not possibly take two hours over your toilet."

"But they may be here earlier," said Beatrice, with an embarrassment which was new to her; "and I want to be in the drawing-room when they arrive."

"I begin to guess something," said her friend, gently. "Lord Desmond is a favorite of yours?"

"Yes," assented Beatrice. "I have known him ever since I was five years old."

"And you like him?"

"And I like him."

Apparently she was not in a communicative mood, for this was all she said.

Ellen began to wonder whether the Earl of Desmond had really touched the heart other wooers had found so cold. One more attempt she made to induce confidence.

"And have you also known his half-brother, Mr. Norton, ever since you were five years old?"

"No; I never met Mr. Norton until I was grown up. I am going in to dress, Nelly. Don't get burnt quite to a berry in this sun."

"I think I see it all," mused the companion, as she was left alone. "Beatrice loves Lord Desmond, and thinks this half-brother who is coming with him a great nuisance. I wonder if the Earl cares for her, and if they will be married; people generally are when they love each other."

Miss Adair went on with her day-dream for a good half-hour longer; then she, too, began to think of going in. Rising half-regretfully, she walked toward the house, where she met Lady Ernstone descending the terrace steps with two gentlemen. One was not far from thirty years of age—a tall, stately man, of soldierly bearing; the other, who was much the younger of the two, was simply a good-looking young fellow, without any of the intellect and talent which were so strongly indicated in his brother's face.

Nelly guessed at once he was Mr. Norton, whose presence she had decided would be the drawback to Beatrice's happiness.

Lady Ernstone performed the introductions; and then, before Miss Adair had realized her mistake, added, kindly, "You must come with

us, Nelly; I want just to show Lord Desmond the new summer-house. Mr. Norton, Miss Adair will prove a charming guide; I trust you to her with all confidence."

The Baroness and the Earl went on. Nelly found herself by the side of the elder of the two strangers; he was Mr. Norton.

"Is there anything alarming in my appearance?" he asked her, pleasantly.

"Nothing. I was only surprised. I had fancied (we take up fancies almost without reason, you know) that you were younger than Lord Desmond."

Hugh Norton smiled. "Then I am sure you expected to see a great rough school-boy. Charles himself is barely twenty-two."

"Do you know the Towers?" asked Nelly, finding conversation difficult.

"This is my first visit. I used to see a great deal of the Ernstons in London, three years ago, before I went to India."

"Beatrice told me she had never met you until she had grown up."

"It was her first season, I fancy. She was greatly admired. I never felt more surprised than at hearing she was Beatrice Ernstone still."

"Every one wonders at that."

"Is she as beautiful as ever?"

"Quite as beautiful!"

"Are you staying with her now?"

"I always stay with her. I am her companion."

Mr. Norton seemed surprised.

"I always fancied, Miss Adair, that a companion was some one who took care of a young lady. Now I am quite sure Miss Ernstone looks more fit to take care of you than you of her, unless she has altered greatly."

"She has not altered at all. She will be so sorry to have missed you. She went indoors a little while before you came."

The path grew wider now, and the two parties merged into one. The new summer-house was visited and admired, and then they returned to the house, and went straight to their own rooms. Already there was too little time for an elaborate toilet.

Nelly had no maid when she first came to the Towers. Something had been said of her sharing the services of Miss Ernstone's Marie, but she had preferred to be independent; so, to-night, she could hurry as she liked. She twisted her soft hair into a graceful coil; inducted her small feet into a bewitching pair of satin slippers with the greatest haste imaginable; then came to a dead stop. What was she to wear?

Nelly had plenty of dresses; only her doubt was whether this ought to be considered as a gala night. If Beatrice devoted two hours to her toilet, surely yes. Yet, to her, Lord Desmond was an old friend; to Nelly, a stranger. But time was passing; she must decide something; so she took out a delicate white dress, of some soft, gauzy material, very simply made, and open at the neck and wrists, to show her white throat and rounded arms. She put clusters of white jasmine, with its graceful green leaves, at her bosom, and twined the same flowers in her hair; then she went downstairs.

Beatrice was alone in the drawing-room, resplendent in pink silk, shaded with rich filmy lace; nor did she look over-dressed. Miss Ernstone wore jewels and silks as her right. She was wonderfully beautiful to night. She turned to her friend, with a smile. "All in white, Nelly! Why, you look like a bride! Don't blush so, child! Every girl expects to be a bride some day."

"Do you, Trix?" half whispered Nelly.

"Yes!" The word was just murmured in the low, rich voice; then the door opened, and Lady Ernstone entered. She was followed almost immediately by her two guests and her husband. Dinner was announced, but they did not go to it in correct fashion. The Earl, who ought to have taken his hostess, offered his arm to Beatrice; so Mr. Norton had to conduct that young lady's mother, and Nelly fol-

lowed with the Baron. She sat between him and Mr. Norton at the table, but a great deal of her attention was given to the pair opposite. If Beatrice loved Lord Desmond, certainly she did not show it. She treated him in an easy, familiar way, something like an elder sister might have treated him. There was no mistaking his feelings. He showed too plainly in every look and word that he loved Miss Ernstone. One word of love from her, and he would have been happy. Nelly noticed that he saw no one else—hardly heard when he was spoken to; in all the room, seemed only conscious of the queenly figure at his side.

Another thing the silent watcher noticed—Miss Ernstone and Hugh Norton were not on good terms. When they met, Hugh bowed deeply, but never offered her his hand; and throughout the dinner never once addressed her. He spoke of her once or twice, but always as Miss Ernstone. Charley called her Beatrice openly; but never used any other name.

Nelly wondered why Hugh Norton looked so coldly on the beautiful woman his brother loved; why Beatrice never suffered her dark eyes to meet his. Clearly there was something wrong between these two. Had they quarreled in the far-off time, before Mr. Norton went to India? But what could they have quarreled about?

The gentlemen did not linger over their wine, but followed the ladies to the drawing-room.

Beatrice had strolled out on the terrace, a lace scarf over her dress. Lord Desmond went after her. Nelly poured out the coffee, and Mr. Norton stood by her, cup in hand. Lady Ernstone was talking about his brother.

"Charley always seems like a son to me. It brings back my boy's memory when he is here."

"I think he would like to be your son really, Lady Ernstone," answered Mr. Norton. "I believe he had it in his mind when he came to the Towers."

She smiled sadly.

"I do not think there is any chance of that. Beatrice seems singularly averse to matrimony. I am afraid, too, she and Charley have been too much brother and sister ever to become any thing else."

"Yet he has a true heart," said Hugh, gravely. "I think he would make any woman happy; and Desmond Castle is a dreary place without a mistress."

"You should set him a good example," laughed Lady Ernstone. "Except the title, you are in every respect as eligible a match as your brother. I am sure the Priory must want a mistress as badly as does Desmond Castle."

"Ay; but the Priory has been mine only three short months. Charley has reigned at the Castle more than ten years."

"Is it really so long as that since the old Earl died?"

"Yes; he survived my mother but a few months."

The minutes passed. Beatrice and Lord Desmond did not appear. Nelly volunteered to call them in to coffee. She fancied they might prefer her summons to a servant's. To her surprise, Mr. Norton offered to accompany her.

"Do you know, Miss Adair," he asked, kindly, as they stepped out onto the terrace, "you and I are old friends?"

"Old friends!" repeated Nelly, in amazement. "Why, I never saw you till to-night; and don't think I ever heard of you till a week ago!"

"Yet we are friends of ten years' standing. Don't you remember when you lived in St. John's Wood, and your father—not so celebrated in his profession then as he became afterward—used to receive young men to prepare them for the army?"

"Yes," breathed Nelly, in incredulous reply; "I remember all that, but—"

"I was one of those lads; and stayed six

months with your father. You used to wear a blue sash, and a short white frock, and come in to dessert every evening. Fairy I used to call you then, and you called me Hugh."

"You cannot be Hugh Lester! You are Mr. Norton!"

"I am Hugh Lester Norton, and have borne the last name only a few months. I suppose there is more difference between eighteen and twenty-eight than between nine and nineteen. I knew you the moment Lady Ernstone introduced us, and you won't even believe in my identity when I assure you of it."

"Then you are really Hugh?"

"I am really Hugh. Ah! what changes have taken place since that! I read of Mr. Adair's death in the newspaper long before I went out to India. I wondered then what had become of my fairy playfellow."

"I went to a convent to be educated."

"A convent! You are not a Roman Catholic?"

"No; but mamma did not like foreign schools. She is dead now. Lord Ernstone was a distant cousin of hers; and so, when I had to leave the convent, he brought me here to be Beatrice's companion."

"And you are all alone in the world, poor little girl!"

"I am very happy."

"Fairies have the knack of being so; I remember that of old. Do you like Miss Ernstone?"

"I am very fond of her."

"I must tell you my history some day, Miss Adair,"—going back to nineteen and twenty-eight, and banishing the freedom of other days. "I fear it will not interest you so much as yours has interested me."

"I shall like to hear it," she answered, thoughtfully. "It is so nice to meet some one who knew papa."

"I never thought of finding you here when Charley persuaded me to come."

"Mr. Norton!"

"Yes."

"I want to ask you something, if you will promise not to be offended."

"I shall never be offended with you, Miss Adair."

"Why don't you like Beatrice?"

"I never said I did not like her."

"But I am sure you do not. You never spoke to her once."

"She was busy with my brother. Besides, I did not know her when she was nine years old; so, you see, you have a prior right to my conversational efforts, such as they are."

Nelly shook her head.

"I am sure you don't like her, do you?"

"I think she is the most beautiful woman I ever met—and the most cruel."

"Mr. Norton!"

"I shall call you the most cruel if you so disregard Lady Ernstone's wishes. You promised to find Miss Ernstone and my brother, and bring them in to coffee."

"They must be walking in the shrubbery."

They went thither, and found Lord Desmond and Beatrice.

"Coffee ready!" repeated the heiress, gayly.

"Then we will go in at once."

She placed herself beside Mr. Norton, and walked with him into the house; but Ellen Adair noticed that they did not exchange a single word.

She herself, following with the young Earl, was not much more talkative. Charley Desmond was too really in love to be an entertaining companion. Perhaps he had followed the young heiress out into the grounds to tell her of all his hopes, and beg her to speak the one word which should crown his life with happiness; perhaps he had been going to reveal his secret at the very moment when his brother and Miss Adair disturbed them. Certainly he walked at Nelly's side in perfect silence until they had reached the drawing-room, and heard Lady Ernstone's mild regrets that the coffee was cold.

CHAPTER II.

REJECTED LOVE.

"Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned,
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned."

SWIFTLY passed the summer days which followed the arrival of Lord Desmond and his brother at the Towers; each one seemed to bring new charms with it. There were pleasant wanderings in the woods, drives and rides through the pretty country lanes, sweeter walks in the twilight, when more than one slumbering heart was awakened to the darts of Cupid's archery.

It seemed to Nelly Adair that she saw less of Beatrice at this period than ever before in the same given time since she had first come to the Towers. They were together a great deal, but never alone. By accident or design, Beatrice avoided a *tete-a-tete*; she shrunk from Nelly's company as much as she could. Of the four young people in the grand old house, its heiress had the least pleasure.

A heavy burden lay at her heart—a burden whose weight she was too proud to confess to any human ear; her whole nature was filled with one intense longing for something she began to fear would never come, and all the while was obliged to keep up the semblance of gayety to hide her trouble from her loving parents; and, more than all, to be daily and hourly on the watch to guard against giving Charles Lord Desmond an opportunity to tell his story.

Beatrice knew his secret—knew quite well that he loved her; but had no intention of becoming his wife; all she wanted was to detain him at the Towers; she felt positive that when once her refusal had been spoken he would return home, and that his half-brother would accompany him.

That was her real trouble. Beatrice wanted Hugh Norton to stay on at the Towers; she would have given her youth, her wealth, her beauty, any thing on earth, for this man's love.

These two, whom Nelly Adair, in her innocence, had decided were a bother to each other, were more than mere acquaintances. When the heiress was in her first season, she had turned the head of a handsome, penniless young captain. She had been Hugh Lester's idol; in those days he had almost worshiped her; for a glance or a smile from her he would have done any thing. His family was as old as hers; he had a good position in the army, with chances of promotion, and had thought that she cared enough for him to wait until that promotion came.

After weeks of love-making, of stolen interviews, and passionate letters, he told Beatrice every thing, all he was, all he might be, and all he hoped.

"Could she," he asked her, "for the sake of his great love, be content with a moderate income? Would she be true to him until he could claim her?"

He asked her this fondly, with every confidence in her reply, for Beatrice had given him every encouragement, had done all in a woman's power to make him think she loved him.

It was almost a thunderbolt to the young captain when Miss Ernstone, in a firm voice, which never faltered, unhesitatingly refused him.

"She was not fitted to be a poor man's wife; she dreaded the hardships which always followed narrow means. Be true to him for three years? Impossible!"

What pride, what mad folly, possessed the heiress to speak thus? She was proud of her power over the handsome officer; did not believe her own heart was touched; meant to forget him, and make a grand match befitting the last of the Ernstones. But when news came that Captain Lester had exchanged into a regiment under orders to sail for India, she realized the truth; she had sent away the man whom, more than her own life, she loved. But once gone from her, she was truer to him than are many girls to their betrothed: riches, titles, rank, all these were offered to her, and she

would have none of them. She waited, hoping against hope that he might return to England, and ask her the same question once again. Ah, what a different answer he would then receive!

This story of the past will give you the clew to everything strange in Miss Ernstone's conduct: she hoped, and, indeed, believed that Hugh would return to his allegiance; to regain the love she had once scorned would have suffered any loss, risked any crime. She looked on Hugh's love as her right; it had been hers once, and therefore ought always to be hers.

Early in the spring of the year we tell of, Lord Ernstone met Charley Desmond in town, and heard the astounding news that his half-brother had come into a large property, and was on his way home from India to take possession of his estate. Charley, who had been at college at the time of his brother's infatuation, had no idea that he and Beatrice had ever been more than friends. He was a devoted admirer of the heiress, and when in the summer an urgent invitation came to him and Hugh to pass some weeks at the Towers, he persuaded his brother to accept it.

Not that Hugh Norton needed much persuasion. The wound which Beatrice had inflicted was healed. He rather gloried in seeing her and proving that she had no longer any power over him. He knew Charley's secret, and although he did not think Miss Ernstone worthy of so much affection, yet for his own part was quite willing that she should become Countess of Desmond. His former madness had been known only to himself and Beatrice; his going to the Towers could not injure Charley's cause. Beatrice looked on his acceptance as a confession of weakness; it was rather a proof of power.

That she had been true to him for three years was what the heiress remembered. She chose to forget the bitter scorn which had driven him out to India. Despaired not of success. She was more beautiful now than ever before. Of course she should triumph; Hugh would return to his former allegiance. It was rather awkward, certainly, that Charley was so foolish about her, but he would soon get over it, and learn to look on her as a sister. How delightful if he would but transfer his affections to Nelly.

Now, in Miss Ernstone's original plan, you see there was nothing cruel at all. She was to be happy, but other people might be happy too; it was only when they declined to fill the roles she wished to assign them, that she thought of being harsh.

Never had any one plotted so well; never had any one more miserably failed. A fortnight passed by, and Mr. Norton had not spoken a word to her save of the coldest courtesy; he avoided her, shunned her. Charley was her shadow; and, worst of all, Nelly's blue eyes, which she hoped would ensnare the young Earl of Desmond, were fast captivating his half-brother.

Nothing sharpens a young woman's eyes so much as jealousy. Long before Hugh Norton knew that he loved the gentle girl he had petted as a child, Beatrice Ernstone saw that she had a rival. There was no obstacle to their union; Nelly was his equal in birth; he had money enough to marry a portionless wife, and not a single relative likely to object to his choice. If ever true love looked likely to run smooth, surely theirs did. No one would step in between them, unless it were she herself.

And this was what Beatrice resolved to do. She, rich in all life's good gifts, made up her mind to work the misery of the girl who had been her faithful friend. She did not positively wish to harm Nelly, only to make sure that she should never become Mrs. Norton.

And little knowing that she was walking on the edge of a precipice, Ellen Adair lived on, happy as she had never been before, with only one regret—that half of Mr. Norton's visit had already expired. Very soon he would be leaving the Towers.

The first break which came to their quiet en-

joyment was at an impromptu picnic which Lord Ernstone had arranged in honor of his guests. No strangers were to be there, only the six who now knew each other so well. He and Lady Ernstone would drive to Briarleigh Woods in the barouche; the young people could walk or ride as they felt inclined. A liberal luncheon was to be taken with them. Briarleigh Woods was the most noted place for a picnic—in fact, the lion of the neighborhood. Every one welcomed the idea of going there. Lord Desmond thought that in a long day in the open air he could not fail to find the opportunity for which he so eagerly longed; Beatrice fancied she might bring back Mr. Norton to his senses; while Ellen and Hugh could have given no reason for their pleasure, except that they were to be together.

It was a lovely day, not a cloud in the bright blue sky, a pleasant wind relieving the heat of the August morning. The young people had all elected to walk, and Lady Ernstone enjoined them to set out not later than eleven o'clock. Punctual to a moment, Beatrice came down the terrace-steps, hoping to detect Nelly in being late. And at first believed she had succeeded—Miss Adair was nowhere in sight. The two brothers stood close together, apparently in grave consultation.

"Are you talking treason?" asked Beatrice, gayly.

"No," returned Lord Desmond, eagerly; "we were waiting for you."

"Here I am, then, so you need wait no longer. Let us start at once, or we shall be late."

The young Earl was all alacrity. Norton answered, simply: "By all means; there is no occasion to keep either Charley or you, Miss Ernstone. I will wait for Miss Adair; no doubt we shall soon overtake you."

This proposition gave unqualified satisfaction to Lord Desmond, but did not please Beatrice.

"I do not see that there is the slightest occasion to wait for her."

She tapped the ground impatiently with her parasol. Norton, who knew perfectly well that Nelly Adair had only gone to a small cottage, close to which they must pass, yielded the point; they would be sure to meet her, and their going on would save her the trouble of returning; so Beatrice had her way. They started, she with a gentleman on either side.

"It is very inconsiderate of Miss Adair to be so long," interposed Lord Desmond, who, for once, found his lady love's arrangements rather trying.

"Yes," returned Beatrice, sweetly. "Some people are very selfish."

Conversation did not flourish. With either one of his companions Charley could have talked at his ease; with the two he was thoroughly uncomfortable. They had been walking for about a quarter of an hour, when Miss Ernstone asked suddenly, "Will you do me a favor, Charley? I have been awfully stupid. I have left my fan on the drawing-room table, and it is so hot I shall never get on without it! Would you fetch it to me? We will wait for you here."

Charley looked imploringly at his half-brother. If Hugh would only volunteer to return for the fan, he could wait so very happily with Beatrice; but Hugh did not offer. He was expecting to catch sight of Nelly Adair's white dress at every turn of the winding lane, and was not unselfish enough to deprive himself of the sight.

So he accepted the situation, and, almost for the first time since his arrival at the Towers, found himself alone with Lord Ernstone's heiress. Beatrice threw herself on a grassy bank; he sat down beside her, hoping that Nelly would soon join them.

"Have you ever been to Briarleigh Woods?" she asked carelessly.

"Never; I am quite a stranger in this part of Kent, Miss Ernstone."

Beatrice made a desperate plunge; she was too much in earnest to care for little conventionalities.

"Are you always going to call me Miss Ernstone?"

Her voice had a sad ring; her glorious eyes looked full into his face; she laid her one little hand gently on his arm. In spite of all, Hugh Norton confessed to himself that she was superbly beautiful—beautiful, though cruel.

"Are you always going to call me Miss Ernstone?"

"Is it not right that you should be so addressed?" he asked, coldly.

"Not for my friends; not for you."

The emphasis on the "you" told Norton that she had not forgotten the past so thoroughly as he had fancied.

Beatrice went on, slowly, "Will you ever forgive me, Hugh? If you but knew how greatly I have repented my coldness!"

She leaned her hand still on his arm; she bent her beautiful face toward him. Norton wondered what she meant, and would have given much to end the interview.

"You were perfectly right to undeceive me, Miss Ernstone," he said at last. "I had been mad enough to fancy you would be willing to forget my poverty; it was wise to show me my mistake. I quite admit my presumption now; beauty such as yours is meant for a countess, not for the wife of a portionless captain in the army."

"You are very cruel to me," she murmured; "but I must not complain; I have deserved it. Nothing that you could say would be more cruel than my own regrets."

The extreme pathos of her tone touched him.

"I have no wish to be cruel," he replied, "nor have I any right to reproach you. I was not an eligible match for you, and you were justified in telling me so. It was a bitter blow to me; for many months the interest seemed gone out of my life, but now I can understand it was for the best, and am ready to wish you every happiness as my brother's wife."

"Your brother's wife?"

"Yes, Countess of Desmond; as a peeress you need not dread the hardships which follow limited means."

"I shall never be Countess of Desmond."

"The decision, of course, rests with yourself. I fancy you will have to give Charles his answer before long. He seems much as I was three years ago."

The interview so eagerly sought was not progressing as Beatrice had intended. Hugh seemed to have shaken off her chains; the proud heiress, forgetting all save that she loved and feared to lose him, made one more effort.

"Hugh, have you forgotten all that happened three years ago?—will you never be the same again? Because, at nineteen, I acted like an idiot, would you make me miserable forever?"

"I have forgotten nothing," he answered, gravely, the very calmness of his voice contrasting with the agitation of hers; "it is because I remember everything that I never can be as I once was. You were not a child at nineteen, Miss Ernstone; but a woman able to calculate the respective values of love and money. You made your choice then for money; and now your beauty has won for you other love, which brings wealth and a title with it."

"And you hate me?"

He shook his head. "I did hate you, in the days when you had robbed my life of every hope; but now that the old feelings are gone forever, the hatred is over. If you marry Charles, you will have no more sincere well-wisher than myself."

"You wish me to marry him?"

"If it will make you both happy."

"I care nothing for him."

"You must make your own choice. As I said before, you know the value of love, and the happiness of riches."

Beatrice Ernstone drew herself up to her full height, and stood before him.

"I know the value of love, and the happiness of riches," she said, in a strange, intense

tone. "I will strive that both may crown my life. Mr. Norton, for the sake of any tenderness you once felt for me, will you not wish that my hope may be fulfilled?"

He was puzzled at the change in her manner.

"Indeed, I will!"

"You wish me success! Ah, then I shall triumph over all obstacles; I shall win my life's aim!"

For one instant, Hugh Norton doubted her sanity; then he reproached himself for the idea. The interview was a trying one; it had excited her, naturally. After all, perhaps, it was a relief that the explanation was over; it must have come sooner or later. Yet it was with great relief that he saw in the distance the graceful figure of Ellen Adair, and knew that he had finished with the heiress.

CHAPTER III.

ACCEPTED LOVE.

"Love took up the harp of life, and smote on all the chords with might—
Smote the chord of self that, trembling, passed in music out of sight."

NELLY ADAIR came toward Mr. Norton and Beatrice with rapid steps. She greeted them with expressions of regret for having kept them waiting. She had been to a cottage with some message from Lady Ernstone and was unexpectedly detained. Hugh explained that they were waiting for Lord Desmond, who had gone back to the house for Miss Ernstone's fan. Miss Ernstone left him to do all the explanations; she herself hardly spoke. Nelly noticed that her face was white as marble, and there was a strange fixed look upon her beautiful eyes.

"Are you not well, Trix?" she asked, affectionately. "You look so tired!"

"Looks are deceptive, Nelly," returned the heiress. "I am ready for anything." And in another minute or two, the Earl having joined them, they all set out for Briarleigh Woods. Charley and Miss Ernstone went first. Hugh and Nelly followed. Very quiet and thoughtful was Mr. Norton; he could not altogether shake off the remembrance of his interview with Beatrice. He was far from being a vain man, but could not help seeing what, indeed, she had too plainly showed—that she loved him still. It was an unpleasant discovery. Even if he had never seen the sweet face of Nelly Adair, it was doubtful whether he could have conquered his pride sufficiently to address Beatrice a second time; and now that he had learnt to admire the gentle Ellen, it was impossible.

It was only in listening to Beatrice's secret that Hugh learned his own. He loved Nelly with all the constancy—all the deep devotion of a man's second love. His first brief passion for the heiress was over; but the affection he felt for Nelly would endure, and was better worth offering to a wife.

As he walked along the country lanes this pleasant August evening, some sense of the awkwardness of his position came home to Norton. He was not likely to meet Ellen Adair anywhere but at the Towers; could not woo her there unknown to Beatrice; and he felt sure that if once the heiress guessed her companion to be her successful rival, she would make life too hard for Nelly.

His own visit to the Towers was near its close. If he proposed to Nelly before he left, and she accepted him (he had begun to feel hopeful that she would), he could not possibly object to a three months' engagement. And during those three months his darling would be in Beatrice's power. And something told him that she would use that power cruelly.

The picnic at Briarleigh Woods was not quite the success it had been intended. Lord and Lady Ernstone, a simple, kindly-hearted couple, enjoyed the little excursion thoroughly.

Nelly must have been happy while near Hugh Norton, and Lord Desmond was charmed by the unusual graciousness of Beatrice; but the heiress and Mr. Norton found it hard to

keep up appearances. She had the bitter consciousness that she had risked all and failed. He was anxious about the fair girl dearer to him now than aught else on earth. He was not a superstitious man, nor yet a nervous one; he was a brave soldier, and a clear reasoner; yet from this day forward he thought constantly of danger in connection with Nelly. What was to cause it, or of what kind it was to be, he knew not, only a certainty had come to him that she must pass through some dire peril before she could be safe in his care forever.

During all that afternoon he kept beside her. They wandered through the wood, picking ferns; then Nelly produced her sketch-book, and began to draw a grand old tree.

"It will be a remembrance of to-day," she said, artlessly, to Mr. Norton.

"Are you afraid of forgetting it?"

She shook her head.

"No; I have been too happy. I think I never enjoyed a picnic so much as this; but, then, it is the first I have been to in England since I was grown up."

"Do you like being grown up, Nelly?"

"Yes," a little hesitatingly. "Some things are not so nice, but I am very glad to have done with the convent."

"Then you prefer Ernstone Towers to the convent for a residence?"

"Yes; I like the Towers very much."

"Whenever Beatrice marries you will find it dull," suggested Hugh, who did not quite like her extreme content.

"Then I am to take care of Lady Ernstone. We have settled that."

"But if any one wanted to take care of you instead, how would Lady Ernstone get on then, Miss Adair?"

"Oh! no one will," returned the girl, without a pretense of misunderstanding him. "I am not a great heiress, you know, nor yet a beauty like Beatrice."

"I am glad of it," he muttered to himself but not loud enough for her to hear. Then aloud, "How long will your sketch take to finish, Nelly?"

"About half an hour. Don't let me keep you if you want to be exploring further into the wood, Mr. Norton."

"I'd rather stay here, Miss Adair. What are you thinking of?"—for a puzzled look had just crossed her face.

"I was wondering why you sometimes called me Miss Adair and sometimes Nelly?"

"I keep forgetting you are not nine years old, you see, but I will try to remember better."

"I like Nelly best," replied the girl, with a blush; "it reminds me of the dear old times."

"Then let it be always Nelly; only, do you know, in the good old times you used to call me Hugh?"

"I must have been a very rude little girl."

"And you used to say that you liked me better than any one in the world."

"I don't think my world was very large."

"Ah, Nelly! your memory is bad. Now, I can recollect all the things you promised me when you were nine years old."

Perhaps Miss Nelly remembered some of them, too, for her color deepened strangely, and the hands which were busy with the sketch trembled. She was spared any reply at that instant. They heard a voice near them.

"Would you know your future, my pretty lady? Just cross my hand with a piece of silver, and it's just the truth you'll hear."

A bronzed, handsome-looking woman stood beside them, wearing a scarlet cloak; a colored handkerchief was tied over her head, and she wore a short, purple dress. Unmistakably of the Gipsy tribe looked she.

"Would you like it, Nelly?" whispered Norton. "Who knows but she might tell us something of those old promises you seem to have forgotten."

"Nelly did not say 'Yes,' but assuredly she did not say 'No.'" Hugh took a half-crown from his pocket and gave it to the Gipsy.

"Mind it's a good fortune," he said, laughingly. "We don't want to hear any troubles."

"It shall be a true one, my brave gentleman. Is it the lady's hand I'm to read, or your own?"

"The lady's. I fancy, Nelly," aside to Miss Adair, "one fortune will do for both of us. We will go shares."

Nelly put out her hand—a pretty, shapely hand enough; a fairer one was surely never covered by the best Paris gloves, size, sixes.

The Gipsy took the hand in hers, and looked at it attentively. There was something very earnest about the woman; she seemed to believe so firmly in her own powers, that gradually she led Mr. Norton and Ellen to believe in them, too.

"There's as much of the past as the future in what I am going to tell you, my pretty young lady," began the Gipsy, gravely. "I'm thinking you two are old friends, who've been parted this many years. There's no relationship between you; and you, my lady, have nothing nearer than a cousin in all the world."

Almost a frightened look came into Nelly's blue eyes.

"Are you afraid she will rake up those old promises of yours, Nelly?" whispered Hugh, jestingly.

"You've a long life before you, my pretty lady," went on the Gipsy; "but you've a deal of trouble to come. What kind of trouble I can't tell. But there's a change to come, and a great one. You'll be leaving England before many months are over your head."

"Leaving England!" gasped Miss Adair. "Not going to the convent—oh, surely not that!"

"It's no convent that'll hold you, my lady; it's but a pleasure trip you'll make. There's one as would like to send you on another journey, only they won't get their own way."

"It's very vague," demurred Ellen. "I can't quite see what is really going to happen."

"Sorrow first, and joy afterward," replied the Gipsy. "You've made an enemy this day, my lady, as you little reckon on; and you've made something better than a friend. Before the trees are bare, your trouble will have come; before they are green again it will be over." And, without another word, the Gipsy disappeared as quickly as she had come.

Ellen Adair turned her sweet face to Hugh Norton.

"I almost wish I had not heard it. It seems superstitious; but do you know, Mr. Norton, the woman was so eager, I really feel as if some trouble would come."

"If it does, send for me."

She shivered a little even in the summer sunshine.

"Has she made you believe it, too? Oh, then it must be true!"

"Don't be fanciful, Nelly," he answered; "troubles come to most of us; it is not wise to go and meet them. Only remember, if any come to you, I can have no greater happiness than to serve you."

"How good you are! Mr. Norton, you said so sadly that 'troubles come to most of us,'—have they come to you?"

"A few. I lost my parents young, you know, and that was a trouble."

"And afterward?"

"Afterward I had another and as I thought a very heavy trouble. Three years ago, Nelly, I fancied happiness was over in this world for me, but now I know that if I had had my wish I should have been wretched."

"What made you see it?"

"Time and absence. Three years in India almost cured me, and since I came home I have completely recovered. Nelly, can you guess what my trouble was?"

"Yes." And how dull and tired her voice sounded! "I think I can."

"What was it?"

"You loved some one, and she died."

He shook his head.

"She did not die; and I am not sure now, Nelly, that it was really love. I think it was

rather a wonderful fascination. She refused me because I was poor, and so I went to India."

"But you are rich now, and—"

"Yes, I am rich now, and cured of my infatuation. I see her now just as she is—a woman beautiful enough to drive men mad, and cruel enough to glory in her works. I would not marry her for worlds; all love for her has long passed out of my heart, Nelly."

She did not answer. A cloud seemed to have fallen for her over the summer sky; darker clouds over her own heart.

"Nelly," whispered Hugh, tenderly, "don't you want to know what cured me—or rather finished the cure begun in India?"

"If you like to tell me."

"A pair of blue eyes!"

He was looking into them very lovingly as he spoke; then, taking her two hands in his, went on, earnestly, "Nelly, I want you to believe that my mad folly of long ago is a thing of the past—that the one love of my life is the love I have now for you. I would have no secrets from you, Nelly. I tell you frankly that for three months I was the slave of a woman's caprice; but if a part of my past has been influenced by another, I offer you my entire future. If you will only give me a little love in exchange for my whole heart, I shall be happy."

The tears were falling fast; she loved him just as he did her.

"And you really care for me like that? Oh, Mr. Norton, I never thought of this!"

"Not 'Mr. Norton,'" he rejoined. "We will blot out the ten years of our separation, and go back to the days when we were Hugh and Nelly. My darling, are you going to make me happy?"

"If I can," she whispered.

"And you will try to love me?"

"I don't need to try. Oh, Hugh, how could you think of me when Beatrice was by?"

"Beatrice may be my sister," he answered, gravely, "and I suppose she is your friend; but I shall never have any affection for her."

"Why do you dislike her?"

"Can't you guess, little Nelly? You are not a witch, child."

"Oh, Hugh, you don't mean that! It was not Beatrice who sent you out to India, and nearly broke your heart?"

"It was Beatrice who nearly made me lose my faith in womankind. I don't think my heart was broken; if it were, dear, you have mended it."

"Oh, Hugh, I am so sorry!"

"I only wonder that you never guessed it, dear. Beatrice and I behave rather strangely to each other."

"I thought she was annoyed because you had come here with Lord Desmond."

"I am afraid she is not so devoted to Charles as all that."

Silence! The two very happy—Nelly's sketch disregarded on the ground, Hugh's arms encircling her.

"Nelly," he asked, at last, "Can you guess why I have told you this?"

She shook her head.

"Lord Ernstone is your guardian. He must know of our love. The news will reach Beatrice. It may be she will seek to prejudice you against me."

"No one could do that, Hugh"—in a tone of great confidence.

"I ask only that you will never believe anything she says until after you have spoken to me concerning it. Heaven forgive me if I wrong her; but, Nelly, I fancy Beatrice Ernstone will try her utmost to sow discord between you and me. My darling, be true to me. Don't let anything come between us."

And she promised that nothing should. So they sat on, disregarding the flight of time, happy as they had never been before, only that there was a fear lurking in Hugh's heart that some shadow lay on his darling's future—that she was threatened by some danger.

The chime of a distant clock fell on their ears—six.

Nelly exclaimed, in dismay, "What will they say?"

"Leave that to me. I shall tell them we did not know how late it was. We have been very happy, Nelly."

"Very happy."

"And they could have sent after us if they were waiting tea."

"Perhaps they have, Hugh."

They had. Lord Desmond and Miss Ernstone had started half an hour before to hunt for the missing ones. It was Beatrice who suggested that she and his lordship should take separate paths. If Hugh and Nelly had not been quite so much engrossed with each other, they must have heard footsteps near them. Crouching down behind them, concealed by a large tree, knelt the heiress. She was in time to see something of what had happened—enough to tell her that a question had been asked and answered. When the clock struck six, she rose from her hiding-place, and came toward the two who had just become lovers.

CHAPTER IV.

SUSPICION RAISED.

"Jealousy is as cruel as the grave."

By no word or sign did Beatrice Ernstone betray that she knew what had taken place. Laying one hand on Miss Adair's shoulder, she said, lightly, "I have been looking for you everywhere, Nelly. Mamma has been quite fidgety about you. I told her Mr. Norton was with you and would take care of you."

"Ay, I will take care of her," repeated Hugh Norton, with a solemnity that seemed out of place. "I ask no higher privilege, Miss Ernstone."

The heiress made him no manner of reply. She turned to Nelly with a smile.

"We are just going to have tea, and I came to find you. Now we will all go back together."

And she linked one hand in her friend's arm as she began to descend the hill.

Hugh Norton had no excuse for not following them. After a few yards they met Lord Desmond, and the four went on quickly to the spot where Lord and Lady Ernstone awaited them. Tea was ready—a real picnic tea—the water boiled over a fire of sticks, delicate home-made bread and butter, peaches and apricots, rich cake and biscuits.

Beatrice did the honors, and did them well. Lord Desmond was her zealous assistant. She smiled on him as she had never done before. Looking at them, Hugh Norton thought that if they were once married, the better part of Beatrice's nature might triumph, and his brother be very happy, after all—not so happy as he himself.

Not for worlds would he have exchanged his Nelly's delicate loveliness for the regal beauty of Miss Ernstone.

It had been Norton's intention to speak to Lord Ernstone that night.

The peer was a generous, kindly man, who would take a real interest in Nelly's future; besides, as he was her guardian and protector, the explanation was due to him. He would certainly place no obstacles in the lovers' way, and might be prevailed on to assent to a very short engagement.

But fortune did not favor Mr. Norton. Every one seemed unusually social after the picnic. There was no dividing into twos or threes.

The six residents at the Towers assembled in the drawing room, and showed no disposition to leave it. Beatrice proposed music, and Nelly Adair sung some of the sweet old Scottish ballads which are always sure to be appreciated. Not the least sweet did Hugh deem the "Land o' the Leal." He thought his love for Nelly was something akin to that which Jean had received from her husband.

He leaned over the piano in eager attention, and when at last Lady Ernstone declared it

was getting late, and he turned his thoughts once more on that desired interview with Lord Ernstone, he perceived with surprise that the peer was not in the room.

"Papa would not disturb you from the music to say good-night," said Beatrice, without the slightest apparent malice. "The long day in the open air has quite tired him, and he hopes you will excuse him."

They all dispersed then. Save that he held her hand in his a little longer than he need have done, there was nothing to tell the uninitiated of Hugh Norton's love for Nelly Adair. He felt strangely annoyed and troubled. It seemed to him an ill omen that his explanation with Lady Ernstone should have been deferred.

The next morning he was down early, half hoping for a word with Nelly before the others assembled. There was no one in the breakfast-room but Lord Desmond, usually the last to make his appearance. Hugh felt disappointed.

"There is something very strange going on in the house," began his brother. "I have heard more running about in the corridor than I should have thought possible. I hope yesterday did not too greatly fatigue Lady Ernstone; she is very delicate."

"She did not do anything, Charley. Sitting in the open air can't tire a woman much, surely?"

At that moment Lord Ernstone himself appeared. His usually cheerful, happy face was so strangely altered that both his guests saw at once that something serious was the matter, and began anxious inquiries for Lady Ernstone.

"She is quite well; my trouble concerns not her."

"Not Beatrice?" came from Lord Esmond's sorrow-stricken heart, almost with a groan.

"Yes; she was not very well last night; this morning she is in a high fever."

"Let me go for the doctor," urged the young Earl, forgetting his friend's staff of servants; "let me go for him at once!"

Lord Ernstone smiled in spite of his daughter's illness; the simplicity of the young lord was amusing.

"My dear Charley, he has been already. He will not say positively what ails Beatrice; tries to assure us we need not be alarmed. I believe myself he does not yet know what form the disease may take; he fears, however, it will turn to an infectious fever, and so, my friends, I must ask you to complete your visit another time. This house would be but a dull place without Beatrice, and her mother and I shall be too anxious to be good companions."

They both expressed their sympathy as they wrung his outstretched hand. It was easy to see from Lord Ernstone's manner that he was seriously alarmed. When his only child might be fighting her battle with death was no fit moment to speak to him of love or marriage.

Hugh Norton felt this, and let his host withdraw without one word on the subject nearest his heart. If Beatrice were laid low, there was nothing to fear for Nelly. From no other person at the Towers would she receive aught but kindness.

Hugh Norton had not much leisure to think of his own disappointment; it took all his efforts to comfort his brother. Charley took the most desponding view possible of Beatrice's state.

"She was too bright and beautiful to live," he said, bitterly. "She is sure to die, my beautiful darling, whom I loved so dearly! She would have been the fairest Lady Desmond ever seen!"

Privately, Hugh Norton thought the heiress not at all too good for earth, if her danger of death consisted in her fitness for heaven. He believed she had some time to linger, but did not attempt to impress his brother with his own opinion. He never hinted to Charley that Beatrice was not the angel he thought her; instead, he spoke hopefully of her recovery, and

the time when they might return to the Towers. Poor fellow, he little thought what a sad return it would be for himself!

It was a sad ending to their pleasant visit. Both felt, as they drove away in the waking brightness of the August morning, that they left something dearer far than self behind them. The one thought of his idol on a bed of sickness; the other that his darling might be threatened with danger when he was not by to save her.

Beatrice Ernstone's illness was mysterious in its suddenness. She had gone to bed well and strong; in the early morning light her bell had rung sharply, and the maid had found her in a high fever, her large, dark eyes glittering with strange intensity. Lord and Lady Ernstone were aroused; the doctor sent for, a simple village practitioner, almost as startled as her parents at the young lady's sudden indisposition. He prescribed a few simple remedies, told Lord Ernstone he had no idea what course the disease might take, and strongly recommended that all visitors should leave the Towers, to escape the possible risk of infection.

No one thought of Miss Adair's danger. Beatrice had asked for her when she was first taken ill; she seemed uneasy if Nelly quitted her side an instant; and the parents, to whom their own child was all in all, permitted the possible sacrifice of her friend to her caprice.

Nelly did not wish it otherwise. In spite of that disclosure of yesterday, she loved Beatrice. She was quite willing to devote her life to her, only she would have liked five minutes' freedom in which to say farewell to her lover. If his arms could have been round her once more; if he could have whispered once again how dear she was to him, Nelly Adair would have found her watch in the sick-room far less trying. As it was, her heart felt a little sad when she heard the sounds of the departing dog-cart which was to bear Lord Desmond and his brother to the railway station.

Toward evening, the doctor's remedies seemed to have taken effect; Beatrice was calmer, more like herself.

Mr. Gibson, who came in in the twilight, declared that all danger was over; he could form no idea what had caused the attack. Miss Ernstone might have over-excited herself, he could not say; but their prompt measures had subdued the fever; there was no longer any fear of infection.

"What a pity I sent those young fellows away!" exclaimed the peer to his wife, rubbing his hands in his glad relief.

"I think it was for the best," replied Lady Ernstone, gently. "What Beatrice will want now is perfect quiet and freedom from excitement. She could hardly have had either with Charley in the house."

"They seemed sorry to go; good-hearted young fellows, both."

"Charley is all that we could wish for Beatrice, if only she would see it."

The Earl looked grave. "My dear Lena, I do not see things quite as you do. I would rather far that Beatrice never married."

"Never married! Do you mean it, Claude? I long to see her children before I die."

"Ah, Lena, if Beatrice were your daughter, I, too, might long to see her children. You have been to her a true and loving mother; I wish other children had lived to claim some of that love."

Lady Ernstone sighed heavily. Very few people remembered (though, of course, the "Peerage" proclaimed the fact) that she was her husband's second wife, and childless. Beatrice had been a tiny mite of two years old when her step-mother came home a bride to the Towers.

Miss Ernstone had grown up the darling of her father and his wife, but though both loved her dearly, their love was different.

Lady Ernstone was intensely proud of her step-daughter, gloried in her beauty, and longed, above all things, to see her make a good match. The father's affection had something of sorrow with it. It was an intense relief to

him that Beatrice said "No" to all her suitors; he hoped, above all, that she might never marry. It was the one point in dispute between him and his wife, and had he only confided his reasons to her she would have owned that he was right.

For a day or two Beatrice kept her room; then she was dressed, and lay on the sofa in her pretty boudoir. She did not look ill, but complained of great weakness. Mr. Gibson, who came daily, seemed surprised at her symptoms; had she not been a peer's daughter, he might have told her that all she needed was to exert herself. As it was, he looked wise, prescribed tonics, and agreed to her own account of herself—"that all her strength seemed to have gone."

Nelly hardly left her. She had not found courage to tell her precious secret; something warned her it was better not. She nursed Beatrice tenderly and affectionately, just as she would have done before the story whispered to her in Briarleigh Woods, only that Beatrice was no longer first with her—she never could be that again.

In one object the heiress took all her usual interest—the letter-bag. After the first morning of her illness she insisted on its being carried up to her, that she might herself unlock it, and distribute its contents as in health. She said it was her only amusement, and her parents consented gladly, Nelly being appointed to take them their share of the correspondence when Beatrice had sorted it.

No letters came for Nelly (this excited no surprise to others), save a rare note from a convent friend in the holidays. The post-bag seldom held anything for Nelly. Poor Nelly Adair! No one but herself knew how eagerly she had hoped Hugh Norton would write; no one guessed the bitter disappointment which filled her heart as morning after morning passed and no letter came! Once, only once, she spoke of it.

"Nothing for me, Trix?" a little sadly.

"Nothing!" returned the invalid, gayly. "Why, Nelly, I thought you never expected letters?"

Of course Lord Desmond wrote daily to inquire for his beloved, and neither Lord nor Lady Ernstone being fond of correspondence, the replies became Miss Adair's duty. How often in writing to Lord Desmond did she long to inclose a line for his brother!—but shyness, maidenly reserve, alike held her back. She could not write to the man who had professed such love for her until she had heard from him. A similar reason prevented her sending him a message. Charley might not know their secret; if not, any but the most formal mention of his brother's name would sound strange to him, and Nelly Adair could not send her regards to the man she loved better than her own life.

"You look pale to-day, Nelly," remarked Beatrice, just one week after that excursion to Briarleigh Woods. "You have been in the house a great deal too much lately. Go for a nice walk this afternoon: mamma will come and sit with me."

Nelly might have answered that something besides staying in the house had robbed her of her bloom, but it was not in her nature to give an unsought confidence. She put on her broad-brimmed hat, and went out gladly enough.

Mr. Gibson was with Beatrice when Nelly returned to the Towers. The simple-hearted doctor looked grave; the fever had long ago departed, yet just as surely his beautiful young patient failed to gain ground.

Beatrice looked annoyed at Nelly's appearance, and the girl, quick to read her friend's face, left her. She wondered a little where Lady Ernstone could be, it was a very unusual thing for Beatrice to receive Mr. Gibson alone.

"I cannot think," repeated the surgeon, when Miss Adair had left them, "what can have given rise in your mind to such a dreadful idea."

"I am sure of it," replied the heiress, grave-

ly. "Mr. Gibson, do you not see that there must be some reason for my loss of strength? I tell you the true one—I am being slowly poisoned!"

Mr. Gibson listened to her in amazement. At first, his impression was that she was laboring under some delusion; but she spoke so calmly, so reasonably, and the fact remained that some unknown cause did really seem to be sapping her strength. At last, in spite of himself, her conviction gained on the man of physic.

"But, my dear Miss Ernstone, why not immediately acquaint your parents with your fears?"

"It would kill them," repeated Beatrice, earnestly, "to know that such a peril threatened me in my own home. Besides, think what a shock it would be to them to know that one they had treated with every kindness should have so badly requited them."

"Surely you do not suspect any one in particular of this awful crime?"

Beatrice's large eyes drooped before him, in affected sorrow.

"Alas! I do."

She breathed a name. The doctor threw up his hands. "Impossible!"

"It is as I say," repeated the heiress, with that quiet assurance which impresses people more than the most vehement protestations.

"But, my dear young lady, do reflect a moment. Miss Adair would be acting against her own interests. Her gain would be, surely, to preserve your life, not to destroy it. Without you, where would be her present luxurious home?"

"Have you never heard of jealousy?"

"Jealousy must have a motive. Even with you gone, Miss Adair would be no better off. Your wealth, your beauty would not pass to her. She could not be the lovely heiress of Ernstone,"—bowing gallantly.

"Mr. Gibson, there is something girls value more than rank, wealth, or beauty."

"Very foolish, then. What is it?"

"Love!"

A silence of full five minutes; then Beatrice said, "With me dead, Ellen Adair thinks she would have my lover's heart. Mr. Gibson, be true to me, keep my secret, and let us watch together."

CHAPTER V.

THE ACCUSATION.

"Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse, steals trash; 'tis something,
nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he who filches from me my good name,
Robs me of that which neither enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed!"

The morning after Beatrice's strange communication to Mr. Gibson, the young heiress, dressed in a delicate rose-colored wrapper, trimmed with white lace, lay on the sofa in her own sitting-room. Lady Ernstone and Nelly Adair were with her.

"How do you feel to-day, Trix?" the latter was asking.

"I am better," returned Beatrice, faintly, "only so hot and tired my lips feel quite parched." And, indeed, there was still a look of fever on the beautiful face. Lady Ernstone, ever anxious, spoke of something which had been much in her thoughts the last two days.

"Beatrice, darling, I cannot believe Mr. Gibson understands your case. You seem to me to lose strength, instead of gaining it, I shall speak to your father to-day, and persuade him to send for a physician from London."

"Pray do nothing of the kind, mamma," and one would almost have thought that the bare idea alarmed Beatrice, so pale did she become. "Mr. Gibson understands my case perfectly. Yesterday he discovered what it was that had so puzzled him in my symptoms. He thinks now that I shall soon be well."

"I wish I had seen him," lamented her mother, only half convinced.

"He will be here this morning. Nelly, I wish you would make me some of that *tisane* they were so fond of at the convent; I am quite tired of barley-water, and never liked lemonade."

It should be mentioned that Beatrice Ernstone had finished her education at the same convent at which Nelly had been educated. The two girls were there together, only the heiress was the first to leave it.

Every one who has made any stay among the French knows the value they attach to the *tisane*. The particular one which Beatrice referred to was made of violets, and a great favorite with her. She and Nelly had themselves collected quantities of the flowers in spring, dried them with care, and preserved them for future use.

"I will tell Marie," began Lady Ernstone before Nelly could answer. "She shall make it at once."

"I can't spare Marie," answered Beatrice with all a convalescent's petulance; "she is doing some needlework for me. Nelly will make it—won't you, Nelly?"

And Miss Adair consented gladly; the violets were brought down, and she carried them with the other ingredients to the dining-room to complete her task. A servant brought in the hot water and withdrew. During the whole time she was making the *tisane*, Ellen Adair was alone; it was not long—ten minutes, perhaps, and then she carried the beverage upstairs in a tumbler. Lady Ernstone had gone away, and Beatrice was alone.

"It is not sweet enough," said the heiress, ungraciously, when she had tasted it. "Give me some more sugar, please, Nelly."

Miss Adair, wondering at the caprice, for it was already sugared to Beatrice's usual taste, ran down-stairs for the sugar. Returning, Beatrice put in two or three lumps.

"I can't think what it is," complained the invalid. "I cannot make it sweet enough. Taste it yourself, Nelly."

"But I would rather not," remonstrated Miss Adair. "You know, Beatrice, I can't bear anything sweet, and there are six or seven lumps of sugar in that cup."

Miss Ernstone turned her large glittering eyes on her companion.

"You dare not taste it!" she hissed. "You know that it is poisoned. You thought, traitress, that you would kill me and take my lover's heart! You have been too slow over your work! I have detected your treachery. Your opportunities for such wickedness are past."

"Beatrice, are you mad or dreaming? I poison you—I, who am your friend! You must be out of your senses!"

"No doubt you wish I were!" returned the other, fiercely. "Hugh would not wed a mad-woman! With me shut up in an asylum, you might have some chance of becoming Mrs. Norton."

Nelly was too utterly stunned to form an answer; her trembling lips refused to fulfill her bidding. She knelt at Beatrice's sofa, her hands clasped in silent supplication that the heiress would retract her cruel words.

She did not even move when she heard footsteps; did not know that Lady Ernstone and Mr. Gibson had entered the room, until the former said, kindly, "Nelly, my child, what is the matter? Surely you and Beatrice were not disputing?"

Mr. Gibson spoke no word; but looked inquiringly at the heiress.

"Yes," she answered, slowly; "we must tell all—the time has gone by for concealment. Mother," turning toward Lady Ernstone, "you wondered why I did not gain health and strength. Learn the truth. I have been poisoned under your very eye; my life has been sapped drop by drop! Look there!" pointing to Nelly's bowed head,—"there is the girl you have loaded with kindness, and loved only after me—and she shows her gratitude by an endeavor to rob me of my life!"

"Do you believe that there is anything more

in this than the fancy of an invalid?" Lady Ernstone asked the doctor.

"I believe," replied Mr. Gibson, "that Miss Ernstone does not make the progress toward recovery she ought to do, and all her symptoms are consistent with slow poisoning."

"I will never believe that Nelly Adair has sought to harm Beatrice."

The doctor coughed.

"Of course," he said, "I shall be glad if it be proved that no guilt rests on Miss Adair."

"Proved!" retorted the Baroness, indignantly. "Of course it can be proved! Miss Adair has never had any poison in her possession!"

"Mother," said Beatrice, approaching Lady Ernstone, the glass of *tisane* in her hand, "Ellen Adair made this. No hand but hers has touched it. I told her something was strange about it, and asked her to taste it. She refused!"

"Ellen," said Lady Ernstone, touching her, "rise; say that you are innocent of this dreadful crime? You know I believe that nothing would induce you to injure Beatrice. I have trusted you as a daughter."

"I have never thought to injure Beatrice!" Nelly answered. "Lady Ernstone, indeed—indeed I am wrongfully accused!"

"The truth may be easily reached," observed Mr. Gibson. "I will take this *tisane* home with me and analyze it."

"That seems fair enough," assented Lady Ernstone. "I gave you the violets here, Nelly, and they were never out of your keeping until you brought the *tisane* to Beatrice. My dear child, do not tremble so. Remember, I believe nothing against you; sick people have such strange fancies sometimes. When Beatrice is well, she will see how foolish she has been; we shall have her asking your pardon for her suspicions in a day or two."

"Can I speak to you alone, Lady Ernstone?" asked Mr. Gibson, abruptly.

Lady Ernstone did not care about the *tete-a-tete*; she was thoroughly annoyed at the turn affairs had taken. Herself the most kind-hearted and unsuspicious woman, she really believed that Beatrice's assertion was nothing more than a nervous fancy which had seized on her, and gained a hold on her mind through her weak state. She considered that Mr. Gibson had acted in a most ill-judged manner. A few judicious words from him might have brought Beatrice to reason; instead, he had taken up her wild fancy himself. It seemed a perfect insult to Nelly Adair—a lady, a helpless orphan, and, save for the Ernstones themselves, friendless.

My lady let fall the train of her dress, and swept across the corridor majestically. Very seldom did she assume the airs of a great lady. She did so now. She wished Mr. Gibson to see that she thoroughly disapproved of his conduct.

The village practitioner was no whit disconcerted; was, indeed, rather glad of that morning's work. Would not renown attend him in his profession for so quickly discovering an attempt at poisoning? He looked on himself already as Miss Ernstone's defender, and saw his name borne on the wings of fame in connection with "Dreadful attempt at poisoning in high life; fatal effect of jealousy, etc., etc.," which would, of course, be fully reported by all the papers.

"Mr. Gibson," began the mistress of the Towers, her usually gentle voice very stern and cold, "I can hardly tell you how annoyed I am at your conduct this morning. A few judicious words might have set the matter at rest; you have raised a never-ending scandal."

"I have raised no scandal, Lady Ernstone."

"I beg your pardon. Do you think my daughter and Miss Adair can continue their past relations after such a shameful charge? I could not blame Miss Adair if she refused to stay another hour in a house where she had been so cruelly wronged."

"If she has been cruelly wronged it will soon be known," objected Mr. Gibson.

"The accusation ought never to have been made. Are you aware, pray, Mr. Gibson, that

Miss Adair's mother was a daughter of the house of Ernstone? My husband rarely speaks of the matter, and of course he does not contemplate his daughter long remaining unmarried; but I believe it is a fact that if Beatrice dies childless, Ellen Adair is Lord Ernstone's lawful heiress. So you will see that we are anxious no slight should be cast on the fair fame of one so near to us."

"Pardon me, Lady Ernstone, but are you not taking a very one-sided view of the subject? You assert that because Miss Adair is of your husband's family, and has been honored by the friendship of Miss Ernstone, it is impossible she could wish to injure her."

"I assert all that."

"But, my dear lady, will you not condescend to look on the other side? Miss Adair, young, high-born, and portionless, becomes your daughter's companion; sees daily and hourly what a pleasant thing it is to be heiress to Ernstone Towers. Miss Beatrice once gone, her honors would pass, you tell me, to her cousin. Lady Ernstone, many a girl has stooped to crime with slighter temptation."

"I'll not believe it," persisted Nelly's generous champion. "I doubt if Miss Adair even knows her real position with regard to the succession, and for no other thing had she cause to envy Beatrice. I repeat—I believe you will find this *tisane* a simple compound of violets, sugar and hot water. If Beatrice were not ill, I should be really angry with her for the commotion she has caused, and the cruel suspicion she has raised against her cousin."

The medical man bowed. "I shall be here this evening; I hope, then, to be able to share your ladyship's views."

"I think I shall send Miss Adair away," spoke my lady, impulsively. "The very sight of Beatrice must be painful to her now."

"In justice to your daughter, my lady, Miss Adair ought to be detained at the Towers, and her movements carefully watched."

"Nonsense!" returned the lady, haughtily. "You have mistaken your vocation, Mr. Gibson; you should have been a detective."

Lady Ernstone, sick at heart, in spite of her own belief in Nelly's innocence, went slowly back to her daughter's sitting-room. The excitement could hardly have come at a worse time. Lord Ernstone, deeming his daughter convalescent, had that morning gone up to London, and was not expected home for two days. All the responsibility of action lay with his wife. Her feelings were to take Nelly's part against the whole world; but one reflection stopped her—Beatrice was not her own child. If she were wrong, and the precious young life had indeed been tampered with, why, when the affair became known to the world, people would say that Lady Ernstone had condoned the offense because she was only a "step-mother."

To her surprise, Nelly Adair was still with Beatrice; she could hear her daughter's voice, and stopped anxiously outside the door.

"He loves me—he loves me still! He may have spoken a few foolish words to you when he was angry with me for my coldness, but he did not mean it. I am Hugh Norton's life-love! Only over my grave will he give a thought to you! You knew this, and so you plotted to sweep me out of your path!"

"I do not believe it," came the low, sweet voice of Nelly Adair; and ah! how sad and weary it seemed. "When Hugh Norton left here he had asked me to be his wife. But for your sudden illness he would have spoken to Lord Ernstone before he left."

"He could have written to papa, I suppose," said Beatrice, doubtingly. "He has been gone more than a week."

"I shall believe he loves me till he himself has told me that the belief is vain," answered the sorrow-stricken Ellen.

"Then listen to this!"—and Beatrice took a letter from behind her pillow. "Listen to these words written only last night! And, without a shade of pity for the blow she was inflicting, she read aloud:—

"MY DARLING,—

"Your letter has filled me with delight. I am so glad to hear you are in no danger. Thoughts of your peril have haunted me since we parted. Time will seem long to me until I can revisit Ernstone Towers, and make my petition to its master. I will do as you bid me, and wait till I come. I hope to persuade Lord Ernstone to consent to a short engagement. The Priory wants its mistress, and I want my love, my only love—your dainty self."

"I don't believe he wrote it," spoke Ellen Adair, looking up with blanched cheeks. "He never could be so false and treacherous!"

"Do you know his handwriting?"

"I should know it anywhere."

Beatrice put the paper into her hand.

"Is that it? Read for yourself! Now are you convinced?"

But no answer came—the blow was all too keen. One awful sense of agony, of bitter heartache, and then Nelly Adair lost the memory of her sorrows. She fell senseless to the ground—fell at her rival's feet. Lady Ernstone heard the sound, and, frightened, came running in. She raised the girl tenderly, then turned to her daughter, angrier than she had ever been.

"Beatrice, I would not have believed this of you! You are as cruel as you are beautiful!"

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE DAY'S WORK.

"Can such things be,
And overcome us like a summer's cloud,
Without our special wonder?"

FOR the first time in her life, Lady Ernstone felt thoroughly angry with her step-daughter. She had been a silent listener to her cruel taunts to Nelly. To her intense surprise, she had learnt that Mr. Norton, who seemed to avoid Beatrice purposely, was in truth, her accepted lover. It seemed to the lady of the Towers that great deceit had been practiced. She had fully believed Mr. Norton to be falling in love with Nelly. Beatrice had certainly not discouraged Lord Desmond's attentions. If she and Hugh Norton married and were happy, it would be at the expense of the two they had duped.

Without another word to Beatrice, Lady Ernstone summoned assistance. Nelly Adair was carried into her own room. Lady Ernstone's maid, a superior servant, watched over her, quite accepting her lady's account of the matter, "that Miss Adair had overtaken herself in waiting on Miss Beatrice."

"She looks very ill, my lady," suggested Simmonds, respectfully. "Would it not be better to send for Mr. Gibson?"

"No," decided Lady Ernstone, promptly. "It is nothing but over-fatigue, and Mr. Gibson is coming again to-night."

She sat by Nelly till she recovered from the attack of fainting; then, when she saw that memory was returning, sent Simmonds downstairs.

"Nelly," she whispered, gently, "I am so sorry for you. I did not think Beatrice could have been so cruel."

Nelly looked at the lady, her blue eyes watching her face, like a criminal who awaits his sentence.

"Do you think it is true?" she moaned. "Oh, Lady Ernstone, does he really love her?"

"She says so, Nelly, and his letter seemed to prove it. I thought he loved you."

"He said so," said the girl, feebly. "He said he should speak to Lord Ernstone—told me so at that happy picnic in Briarleigh Woods. Oh, Lady Ernstone, must I give him up?"

"He is not worthy of you, dear. Beatrice has behaved cruelly. but he is to blame also. However beautiful she is, his word was pledged to you."

"I don't mean that," pleaded Nelly. "If he has left off loving me, his keeping his word could not make me happy."

"Nelly, have you offended Beatrice? What can have so changed her toward you?"

The girl sighed. "I have not done her any intentional injury," she said, thoughtfully. "She may have been angry that Mr. Norton

liked to be with me; but now that is all over she need not mind."

"Do you remember what she said about the *tisane*?" inquired Lady Ernstone, hardly able to suppress a shudder.

To her surprise, Ellen Adair attached no importance to this accusation. She thought of it (as Lady Ernstone had done at first) as the nervous fancy of an invalid. "That will soon come right," she said, simply, "however much Mr. Gibson may disbelieve my word. When once he examines the *tisane* he will own that there is nothing poisonous in it."

"I wish Lord Ernstone were at home," said the wife eagerly. "I have no power over Beatrice at all."

Nor had she. Beatrice loved her quite as well as she did her father, but she obeyed him implicitly, while from childhood she had ruled her gentle step-mother. It was not in Lady Ernstone's nature to command; she preferred to follow. Just now, however, all her indignation was gathered against Beatrice, and her pity was warm and kind for the orphan girl whom the heiress seemed so eager to crush.

"Lady Ernstone," came from Nelly's trembling lips, "you will never tell any one how stupid I have been? You will keep my secret, will you not, and hide from all the world that I loved Hugh?"

"My dear," said the matron, hotly, "I should like to proclaim it everywhere, so that we might see what honorable people think of his conduct. I hope my husband will refuse his consent to the engagement; such a man would never make Beatrice happy."

Nelly sighed.

"For my sake, dear Lady Ernstone," she pleaded, "will you not keep my secret?"

"No one could blame you, child."

"No, but they would him; and I could not bear that. And, Lady Ernstone, don't think me ungrateful; but please, when Beatrice is well, will you let me go away?"

The very request my lady had predicted.

"Why do you want to go, Nelly? Surely you cannot think that I believe this strange fancy of Beatrice?"

Nelly shook her head.

"I feel you trust me; only, Lady Ernstone, I must go away before he comes back. I could not bear to see him and Beatrice together. When they are married, if you need me, I will come."

"And where could you go? You little know, Nelly, how lonely you would be by yourself in this great world."

"I could be some one else's companion, you know, just as I have been Beatrice's."

"I don't think my husband would like that, Nelly. We have always looked on you as a relation. Your mother was an Ernstone. We should not like to see you in a dependent position among strangers."

"I should be happier than staying here."

"Don't trouble your head about it now, dear. I promise you that when my husband returns I will do all I can to help you. Simmonds has gone to get you some lunch; when you have eaten it, I advise you to try to go to sleep. I shall not expect to see you in the drawing-room till dinner-time."

Lady Ernstone thought herself a very skillful diplomatist by this arrangement. She could not bring herself to say to Nelly in so many words, "While Beatrice is so unlike herself you must not see her;" but by advising Nelly to remain in her own room, and keeping watch herself over her willful step-daughter, she successfully prevented a meeting.

Never to her life's end did the kindly lady forget the length of that August afternoon. She sat in Beatrice's room in perfect silence. Despite her great love for her husband's child, she could not shut her eyes to her cruelty. Beatrice affected to doze. She, too, was glad to be spared any conversation. At half-past six, with a sigh of relief, Lady Ernstone went to prepare for dinner, leaving Beatrice apparently asleep.

She found Nelly Adair in the drawing-room

when she came down-stairs. Very sad and weary looked the young girl, her cheeks almost as white as her muslin dress, and a dull, heavy expression in her eyes, as though she had cried till she could cry no longer. Lady Ernstone went up to her and kissed her.

"We dine alone to-night, dear. Beatrice does not care to come down until her father returns."

She linked her arm in Miss Adair's and led her to the dining-room. Neither of them had much appetite, but the semblance of dinner must be gone through, and even many attempts at small talk, made for the two tall footmen who were in attendance, and the butler himself, whose eyes and ears were quite as keen as those of his subordinates. The four courses were at last served; my lady drank a single glass of wine, and looked at Nelly.

"We will sit in the drawing-room to-night, I think, dear. Beatrice does not care for much light in her room, and I want to write a letter."

This was for the servants' ears. Ever since Miss Ernstone's illness the family had assembled in the pretty boudoir after dinner; it would not do to change the custom without a reason.

Nelly and her friend sat down in the drawing-room, bright with lamp-light and gay with flowers of every hue. Neither seemed inclined for conversation. Miss Adair's thoughts were with the man she loved, who had proved himself so cruelly unworthy of her love.

Lady Ernstone was wondering at the non-appearance of Mr. Gibson.

"Of course he found the *tisane* perfectly harmless, and is ashamed to face me after his shameful suspicions this morning," said my lady to herself, but still she felt uneasy. Again and again the wish rose to her lips that her husband were at home. Coffee came in, and she rung for Marie to carry a cup to Beatrice.

"Is Miss Ernstone still sitting up?" she asked of the maid.

"Ah, yes, miladi; Mademoiselle Beatrice is in her boudoir. Monsieur le Docteur is still with her."

And Marie vanished.

"Still with her!" repeated Lady Ernstone, in surprise. "Why, Mr. Gibson must have been here some time. Why did he not ask for me, instead of going to Beatrice? Nelly, I do not like his behavior at all. When once Beatrice is well, Mr. Gibson's services shall be altogether dispensed with."

Nelly smiled languidly.

"I never liked him, Lady Ernstone."

They waited another quarter of an hour.

My lady grew angry. She rung the bell.

"Go to Miss Ernstone's boudoir," she said to the footman, "and give my compliments to Mr. Gibson, and I wish to see him at once."

After all, the summons was unheeded. As the man left the room, they heard footsteps, and soon Beatrice Ernstone entered, leaning on the surgeon's arm. She went straight to her step-mother.

"Mamma, however firmly you believe in Ellen Adair, you still, I suppose, will have some interest in my life. Mr. Gibson has analyzed the *tisane*, and has come to tell you the result."

"It contains enough arsenic to kill a man," put in the surgeon. "But for a merciful Providence your beautiful daughter would have been hurried to an early grave."

Lady Ernstone sat motionless. Words would not come. She could not realize it even yet—would not believe that her daughter's companion could be guilty of such an awful crime. If silent, it was not because she was convinced.

"Mother," repeated Beatrice, hoarsely, "have you no word of sympathy for me? Can you not feel sorry that here, under my father's roof, I have nearly lost my life through the foul treachery of one I thought my friend?"

"Lady Ernstone," came from another voice, as agitated as Beatrice's, "I never did it! For my mother's sake, believe me!"

The peeress roused herself to action by a strong effort. She turned first to Beatrice.

"I shall send for your father at once. A man is better calculated to deal with such a charge than a woman. I am very certain he will not send his kinswoman from his home on such slight proof as you can offer. For you, poor child,"—and her voice softened as she looked at Nelly—"I pity you from all my heart, and hope that this mystery may yet be elucidated. I cannot—will not believe that you have sought to kill my daughter."

Beatrice looked at the surgeon.

Mr. Gibson, who was excessively proud of his own importance, began: "May I ask, Lady Ernstone, what measures you intend to take for your daughter's safety?"

"I fail to see your right to ask, sir!" returned the peeress, haughtily; "but I will answer you. I shall telegraph to-morrow to my husband. By noon he will be at home."

"I feared that such would be your course. I am sorry to cross your ladyship's wishes, but cannot consent that Miss Ernstone's precious life should be endangered. I have, therefore, taken precautionary measures."

Lady Ernstone made no reply. The peeress was amazed at his audacity.

He went on, gravely: "Before coming to the Towers this evening, I called on the nearest magistrate, Mr. Grant. I made my deposition formally before him, and he has issued a warrant for the apprehension of Ellen Adair, on the charge of attempting to murder the Honorable Miss Ernstone!"

Beatrice stood there, coldly triumphant.

Her step-mother trembled at the gaze of her black eyes.

"Do not be alarmed, dear," she said, gently, to Nelly. "In spite of Mr. Gibson's officiousness, I am mistress of the Towers, and will not let them take you."

"Even a peeress must submit to the law," remarked Mr. Gibson.

He opened the door, and two policemen, who had been waiting outside, entered. The surgeon walked up to Miss Adair, and touched her shoulder.

"This is your prisoner, officers. Do your duty!"

The men recoiled from the task a moment. Perhaps the sight of that fair young face had touched their hearts.

The foremost said, respectfully, "It'll be better to come, miss, and make no bother. There may be some mistake; and, if so, you'll be set at liberty to-morrow, after you've been before Mr. Grant."

"Where do you want to take me?" asked Nelly.

"To Belton jail. It may be only for one night, miss. Any way, miss, the warrant's made out, and we must do our duty."

Lady Ernstone saw resistance would be impossible.

"At least you will wait a few minutes?" she said. "Miss Adair cannot go with you like this." And she pointed to the transparent muslin dress, the bare jeweled arms, the flowers in the nut-brown hair.

The men were perfectly civil. They allowed Nelly to go to her own room, patrolling the corridor outside while she made her toilet.

With her own hands Lady Ernstone dressed the poor girl in the plainest things she could find. With all a mother's tenderness she fastened her mantle, and tied a scarf round her neck.

Her heart was very bitter against Beatrice for the first time in all these years. She rejoiced that she was not really the proud heiress's mother.

"Keep a brave heart, my dear," she said, gently. "Lord Ernstone will be at home to-morrow, and then he will soon set all this right."

But, after all, it was Nelly who was calmer of the two at sight of the policemen waiting to claim their prey, as it seemed to her. Poor Lady Ernstone broke into a passion of sobs. The real sufferer had to soothe and comfort

her. Then the parting came, and Ellen Adair found herself with two policemen in a cab on her way to Belton Prison.

After all, this blow was not so severe as the one that had fallen on her earlier in the day. One trouble seemed to soften the other to her. Either alone must have crushed her. Now, if Hugh Norton had forsaken her, what mattered it if a cruel accusation made her a helpless prisoner? And the awful blight cast on her name was easier to bear than if this disgrace could possibly reflect on him. Nelly Adair had no notion of the criminal law. She wondered vaguely if they could possibly prove her guilty of what she had never done; and if so, how they would punish her. She felt no fright, no dread of the future. All seemed blank to her, yet on her pallet bed she slept soundly as in the stately chambers of Ernstone Towers.

CHAPTER VII.

A TELEGRAM FOR LADY ERNSTONE.

"On horror's head horrors accumulate."

UNUSED as she was to sudden action, Lady Ernstone showed wonderful presence of mind after the hapless Nelly Adair had been removed from the Towers. In a few cold words, as severe as she knew how to use, she informed Mr. Gibson that she had no further occasion for his services. Lord Ernstone would be happy to satisfy all claims, but they must hope not to see him again at the Towers.

To describe the annoyance of the surgeon would be difficult. He expected to be feted and rewarded as the preserver of Miss Ernstone. He was forbidden the house, and in terms which, despite her courtesy, showed pretty well the contempt in which Lady Ernstone held him. Muttering excuses and reproaches, he followed the footman to the door. His tactics had hardly served him well thus far.

Beatrice was almost as much surprised as he. From her childhood the first object of both parents, she had never dreamed that her step-mother could see the injustice of any act of hers; now she was undeceived.

Lady Ernstone said a few words to the servant, who returned, after escorting Mr. Gibson to the door.

"James, tell Mr. Martin to assemble the household in the dining-room. I wish to speak to them."

"All, my lady?" exclaimed the footman, in surprise. Never during his five years' service at the Towers had he received such an order.

"All—from Martin to the scullery-maid. No one is to be absent."

The man retired. Mother and step-daughter heard the gong pealing through the house; the sound of many feet followed; then James came back.

"They are all there, my lady."

"Lady Ernstone, without a word to her daughter, swept down-stairs, and passed through the long file of servants till she had reached the large oaken chair where her husband always sat. She began:

"I have sent for you all, to explain what some of you must have seen—the entrance of policemen to the Towers, and the departure of Miss Adair. My daughter" (never before had she felt ashamed to say that word), "as you all know, has been seriously ill. The fancy seized on her that she was being poisoned. Mr. Gibson declares that the *tisane* prepared for her this morning by Miss Adair contained poison. On this assertion he has obtained a warrant from Mr. Grant for Miss Adair's apprehension. The folly and intrusiveness of this working on an invalid's fears I need not enlarge upon. Your master will be at home to-morrow, and will know how to protect his young ward. I firmly believe myself that the whole accusation is a mistake, and insist that Miss Adair's name be mentioned here with all respect due to a daughter of the Ernstones."

There was deep silence as she finished. Only one or two of the younger maids, to whom

Nelly had shown many a little kindness, sobbed audibly. Then came a little whispered consultation among the upper servants; and, finally, Martin, the butler, said, respectfully, "We should be sorry all of us, my lady, for any trouble to happen to Miss Adair. There's nothing we would not do to prove her innocence."

"Thank you," said Lady Ernstone; and then she went quietly to her own room, and the assembly dispersed.

"Miss Beatrice ought to be well shaken," muttered Simmonds to the others when they were back again in the servants' hall. "Why, she'll be taking up the same notion about one of us next!"

"It's that brute of a Gibson!" declared the butler, forgetting his dignity. "I'd like to have the ducking of him in the mill-stream! Fancy bringing such a charge against Miss Adair, a lady born and bred!"

Very short and simple was the telegraphic dispatch which Lady Ernstone penned the next morning to her husband.

"Beatrice is well; but a dreadful trouble has arisen. Return at once. Let nothing stop you."

"Ride to Belton at once with this, James, and wait for an answer," were the orders to the servant.

She calculated that the answer might arrive in three hours, certainly not before.

Imagine her surprise when her maid brought her one of the well-known yellow envelopes barely an hour after James had set out.

"An answer already? Simmonds, it seems impossible!"

"I don't think it's an answer, my lady; more likely a telegram that has crossed yours," respectfully replied Simmonds.

Lady Ernstone's trembling fingers almost refused to open the envelope. Her face blanched as she read:—

"GEORGE CARR, physician, to LADY ERNSTONE:—
"Accident to Lord Ernstone. No danger, but very ill. Come at once."

The wife did not faint nor utter a cry. She, who all her twenty years of married life had been waited on and protected from every sorrow, bore up bravely under the sudden blow.

Simmonds was no ordinary servant, but a trusted maid. Her mistress was obliged to open her heart to her confidante in this hour of distress.

"Shut that door," she said, simply, "and come here." Then, as the woman obeyed, "Your master has met with an accident, and I must go to him in London. Simmonds, can I trust you to do all that is possible for Miss Adair?"

"I'd go to the prison every day, if they'd let me in, my lady," said the faithful woman.

"That would not help her. Listen, Simmonds. I believe firmly that Miss Adair is most unjustly accused. I believe that my daughter and Mr. Gibson are absurdly mistaken, but I cannot prove it. This I had hoped my husband would do. All I can effect for the poor girl is to send down one of the leading solicitors. He will come here. Remember, Simmonds, whatever Miss Ernstone's orders, you are to give this gentleman every assistance in your power."

"What name will he give, my lady?"

"I do not know. I have no idea whom to send. He will come to the house, and ask for you, Simmonds. I think if through any neglect of ours any harm came to that poor motherless girl, I should never have another happy hour in my life."

"It is strange," spoke Simmonds, in her frankness, "that Miss Beatrice, who always thought so much of Miss Adair, should be so ready to believe ill of her, my lady."

My lady did not answer. If the two were rivals in love, she understood Beatrice's conduct too well. She repeated her directions to the maid, then sought her daughter.

"How do you feel this morning, Beatrice?"

"I feel quite well, mamma. Now that the cause for my illness is removed, no doubt I shall soon be myself again."

Tears stood in Lady Ernstone's eyes.

"My child, have you no pity for your friend? Oh, Beatrice! how can you be so hard?"

The heiress shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"Really, mamma, you carry your charity too far. I am not worse than other people. I love my life, and cannot forgive the person who has done her best to deprive me of it."

"We will not speak of that, Beatrice," interposed her mother. "We shall never agree about it. I came to tell you that your father has met with an accident, and I am going to him in London."

"An accident? Oh, mamma, is he very ill?"

Her evident anxiety touched Lady Ernstone.

"Not dangerously, I trust, dear, but I must go to him. Beatrice, if you write to him do not mention this sad affair about Nelly; it would prey upon his mind."

Beatrice's guilty heart felt relieved. Everything seemed in her favor. With Lord Ernstone on a sick bed, his daughter had little fear of not crushing her rival.

Lady Ernstone drove to Belton Prison on her way to the station. What she learnt there was little reassuring. Miss Adair would be brought before the magistrates, and formally charged with attempting to poison Miss Ernstone. Then proceedings would be adjourned to allow of the unlucky *tisane* being analyzed by some one of more note in the medical world than Mr. Gibson. That the mother of the intended victim should so interest herself in the prisoner created great surprise.

Lady Ernstone said she should procure the best legal advice for the defense, and took her departure.

Arrived at her own town house, for a short space she forgot everything but her husband.

She found he had been knocked down by a horse and trampled on, but no bones were broken; and the physician entertained hopes of a recovery, if he were kept perfectly quiet, and fever did not supervene.

Poor Lady Ernstone! not one word could she say to him of home troubles. At any other time she would have appealed to Charley Desmond for assistance; but if Beatrice really had jilted him for his half-brother, it would be wrong to engage him in anything that would bring him in contact with her.

Doctor Carr, who knew the gentle Baroness well, was puzzled by the trouble on her face.

Again and again he repeated his hopeful verdict of her husband's case.

She did not look comforted.

"There is nothing wrong with Miss Ernstone, I hope? I heard she had been indisposed."

The peeress took courage. Doctor Carr possessed a kind heart; he might be able to advise her respecting Nelly.

"Could you spare me half an hour?" she asked. "I am in great perplexity; and now my husband is helpless, I have no one to consult."

The physician took a chair beside her.

"My dear lady, anything I can do for Lord Ernstone and his family is a pleasure. Pray tell me how I can help you?"

Thus entreated, Lady Ernstone poured out the whole story. Doctor Carr listened gravely, his interest deepening as she went on.

Many a marvelous family history had he heard, but never one stranger than this.

"Lady Ernstone," he said, when she had finished, "do you know the strangest feature in the case would be thought by many that you do not take your daughter's part?"

"Perhaps I ought to," said the lady, feebly. "Only, Doctor Carr, the other girl is younger than Beatrice, and alone in the world. I can't think harshly of her."

"Does Miss Ernstone really believe the poisoning theory herself?"

"Indeed, she does! I am told she confided her fears to Mr. Gibson before the affair of the *tisane*. It seems they were both on the watch."

"And she has always seemed to like this young girl, Miss Adair?"

"Always. They had not been so much together lately, certainly; for we had two visitors—Lord Desmond and his brother, Mr. Norton."

"Do you think the young ladies quarreled over these gentlemen?"

"I cannot say. Lord Desmond has always been an admirer of Beatrice. I fancied Mr. Norton was attracted to Miss Adair; but it might have been fancy."

"Do you know," said the physician, suddenly, "I do not believe the young lady is guilty. It seems more like a chapter of accidents which have connected her with the charge. It is a very common fancy with patients suffering from nervous disorders that they are being poisoned. I have known a dozen such cases—perhaps more."

"Do you think Beatrice a likely subject for such a fancy?—you know her well."

"Yes, and her mother before her, so ought to understand her constitution."

Lady Ernstone did not notice the evasion; the mention of her predecessor had aroused her curiosity—a longing never quite cured during the long years of married life—to know something of the fate of her husband's first wife.

"Beatrice's mother must have been very beautiful," she said, gently. "Of what did she die, Doctor Carr?"

The physician almost started, but instantly recovered his equanimity.

"A general break-up of her constitution, I think they called it. I did not attend Lady Margaret in her last illness. With regard to this sad affair at Belton, the very best thing you can do is to send Mr. Gresham down; he's one of the most promising solicitors of the day—young enough to have a spice of romance, and be all the more interested in his client because she happens to be young and beautiful."

"And do you think they will set Miss Adair free at once?"

Doctor Carr almost smiled at the simplicity of the question.

"I fear not," he answered, gently. "The law has a great many forms, and it is a tedious matter to satisfy them all. I am quite sure Gresham will do as much as any man can. I'll call at his chambers for you, and tell him about the case. Did you say the first examination was to come on to-day? I suppose it'll be in all the evening papers?"

His listener shuddered.

"They can't prove her guilty, can they?" she urged. "It would be so dreadful; fancy her in prison, and only just nineteen!"

Doctor Carr looked compassionate; he was a father himself.

"We will hope for the best; at worst there will be a long delay before she is tried. If we can get Lord Ernstone well before then, he may do more for Miss Adair's cause than we may hope to effect."

"But he knows nothing about the matter!"

The physician did not tell her he believed her husband held the key to the mystery; he only tried, in vain, to make her feel more hopeful.

"I shall tell Gresham to call me as a witness, just to show what strange fancies nervous patients take up. It is just possible, you know, as Miss Ernstone gets stronger, she may remember something which would alter the position of her friend."

Poor Lady Ernstone shook her head.

"You are very kind, Doctor Carr; but Beatrice is firm as a rock. Oh, dear, how little I thought that all this trouble was coming to us!"

Doctor Carr, for once neglecting his profession, drove straight to some chambers in the Temple, where lived a young solicitor—very clever, but who very seldom had any chance of showing his talents. Frank Gresham was a great favorite with the physician, who seized on this opportunity of serving him, honestly believing also that he was just the man to get at the rights of the affair at Belton.

Mr. Gresham was at home, and disengaged; he was not courted enough to make it difficult to see him.

Doctor Carr began at once.

"Frank, my boy, I have come to make you famous. I bring you the case which shall make your name known."

"Has any one been libeling you?" asked the young lawyer, eagerly. "That's the only kind of business I can fancy you wanting a solicitor for."

"Something better than that. Lady Ernstone wants you to go down to Belton to defend her ward on a charge of attempting to poison the young heiress of Ernstone. It's a most romantic case; the prisoner and her supposed victim are mere girls!"

"You have heard the particulars, I suppose?" said Gresham, quietly. "Tell me one thing—is the girl innocent? Somehow I don't care to make my fortune by defending a guilty woman."

"Have no fear," was the positive reply; "she is innocent!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A DARK DAY.

"In man's most dark extremity,
Oft succor dawns from Heaven."

THAT afternoon in Briarleigh Woods, when Hugh Norton told his love-story to Ellen Adair, and received her promise to be his wife, will not have been forgotten. He had then warned her that Beatrice Ernstone would do all in her power to separate them. In spite of his common sense, he was oppressed with a strange belief that danger threatened his darling. He left the Towers still anxious about her; and in the time of his absence addressed no word or line to her, but wrote passionate love-letters to the woman who had once nearly broken his heart.

This was just as Hugh Norton's conduct appeared to the lookers-on; but any one who judged him by appearances would have judged him wrongly. Hugh was too true to change with every wind that blew. His heart had never faltered in its allegiance to Ellen Adair; he had written to her every day; had received, as he believed, her answers back again; and as soon as Beatrice was out of danger, intended to return to the Towers, and claim his darling from her guardian.

It was all Beatrice's work. From the moment when, an unseen listener, she heard Hugh Norton ask her friend to be his wife, she planned that friend's ruin—planned it quickly, skillfully; talent, alas! sadly misused. All through that summer's evening she was thinking out her scheme. That Hugh was lost to her for all time, she would not allow; believed that if she could only separate him from Ellen Adair, in the future he might return to her. The first thing was, to induce him to leave the Towers before he had spoken to Lord Ernstone of his hopes. Beatrice's sudden illness was planned; feverish she well might be, after the fearful excitement of the night. When Mr. Gibson saw her wild, delirious state, little wonder that he was deceived. The peer had thought his verdict—"he could not tell what form the disease might take"—a mere excuse; it was the simple truth. He believed Miss Ernstone to be very ill; later on, wondered at her slow recovery. She meant him so to wonder, that he might the more easily be led to suspect Miss Adair.

No one but a woman strengthened by passion and jealousy could have carried out such a cruel scheme. Hugh Norton and his brother once out of the house, Beatrice's task was easy. The post-bag was opened by her. She knew Hugh's writing as her own. She calmly appropriated his letters to Ellen. The one she showed the miserable girl as proof positive of her lover's falseness had been addressed to Miss Adair. By a fortunate chance, no Christian name was mentioned in it, and the sense could be distorted and made to serve the purpose of this guilty heiress.

To get rid of Nelly was the next object. Beatrice knew that her parents would not send her away for a slight cause, and so she prepared this extraordinary accusation, making a tool of Mr. Gibson, who really believed in Miss Adair's guilt. An awful hatred for her rival had seized Miss Ernstone. She could have killed Nelly, and gladly, only that that would not have brought her any nearer to Mr. Norton. He could not persist in his engagement to a convict. Even if he did not return to Beatrice, he could never marry Nelly. Never a doubt came to the heiress that her victim would be found guilty; the chain of evidence was strong, and of that chain perhaps the most formidable link was the fact that, failing Beatrice, Nelly would become Lord Ernstone's heiress.

Sitting in his pleasant chambers in Piccadilly, thinking how very hot and dusty London was in August, Hugh Norton lazily took up the *Times* the day after Lady Ernstone's arrival in London, and was turning it idly in his hand, when his eye was caught by a paragraph, headed "Tragedy in High Life—Attempted Murder of Miss Ernstone!"

He read it to its close; only a few lines, but to him how greatly interesting! The information was singularly brief, merely relating that Belton and the neighborhood had been horrified by an attempt to poison Miss Ernstone, only daughter of Lord Ernstone, of the Towers. "The most painful feature in the case," went on the paper, "was, that the person to whom suspicion pointed was the cousin and intimate friend of the heiress. The preliminary examination had taken place before the magistrates, but the case was adjourned, in order to allow the prosecution to produce witnesses. The evidence," concluded the paragraph, "is decidedly against Miss Adair, and it will not count in her favor to remember the advantages she would gain by the death of Miss Ernstone, failing whom she is said to be heiress presumptive to the Ernstone title and estates."

Hugh Norton's one feeling on reading the cruel lines was indignation. How could Lord and Lady Ernstone, knowing the innocent mind of Ellen Adair, suffer her to be accused of such a crime? How could Beatrice make such a charge? He was thankful his brother was not with him—they would have taken such different sides on the matter. He never hesitated, never doubted; he meant to return to Belton that very day and present himself at the Towers. He could attend to nothing, fix his mind to nothing. Mechanically he turned the paper about to see if there were further particulars. He then read of Lord Ernstone's accident, and the arrival of his wife in London.

"Heavens!" said the young man to himself; "everything seems playing into Beatrice's hands. With her parents away—one laid low, and the other occupied with him—Nelly is at her mercy!"

Mr. Norton left his breakfast untouched, hailed a cab, and drove at once to Lord Ernstone's town house.

"Can I see Lady Ernstone?" he asked of the footman—it was then barely ten o'clock. "Take my card to her, and tell her I have come on urgent business."

He was shown into a pleasant morning-room, and almost directly Lady Ernstone joined him. He pointed to the paragraph in the *Times*, which he carried in his hand. "What does it mean?" He forgot all ceremony, all greeting; he could only ask the question on which so much depended.

Lady Ernstone—strangely different from the gentle, kindly hostess of the Towers, worn and pale with watching by her husband—answered, quietly: "It means that a terrible charge has been brought against Miss Adair, and I fear it will take all our efforts to disprove it."

"Then you believe in her innocence? Oh, Lady Ernstone, how could you suffer them to treat her so?"

It seemed to the peeress he was the person who ought to be reproached for his treatment

of Nelly. She replied, more coldly: "Mr. Norton, by what right you say this I cannot tell. What one voice could do for Miss Adair, I did. I took her part against my daughter, against the representations of others."

"Forgive me; I cannot think of it calmly. Lady Ernstone, this is not the moment for such a story, but you ought to know that Nelly Adair is my promised wife. But for Miss Ernstone's illness, I should have spoken to your husband before now."

"I think there must be some mistake. I understood you were engaged to Beatrice; she—"

"Lady Ernstone," spoke Norton, eagerly, taking her thin hand in his two bronzed ones, "Nelly Adair is my betrothed; Heaven willing, she shall be my wife! Whoever has told you otherwise has spoken cruel falsehood!"

"But I heard your letter myself! I heard Beatrice read it!" repeated the bewildered listener.

"I have never written to Beatrice since I left the Towers. I have written to Miss Adair almost every day."

"Ellen has never heard from you. She told me herself she had not had a line from you."

"Then there is treachery. Why, I have her answers, or what pretend to be her answers, in my pocket!"

He took out a dainty envelope, directed in a clear feminine hand, and showed it to Lady Ernstone.

"That is not Nelly's writing. It is something like Beatrice's. Nelly's is smaller—quite different."

"Lady Ernstone, do you think your daughter has tampered with my letters? It is a painful question to put to you. Do you believe that she has forged these replies?"

The lady did not answer; she was quietly crying. Very, very bitter seemed her position. However matters went, grave blame lay with Beatrice. She would almost rather have seen her lying, like Nelly, in prison, wrongfully accused, than know that of which she now felt convinced.

Mr. Norton saw the tears, and went on more gravely.

"Three years ago, before I went to India, for a little while Beatrice and I were lovers; she rejected me on account of my want of means. I have fancied she regretted her decision. Dear Lady Ernstone, believe me I will do all I can to shield your daughter from any blame; only help me to save poor Nelly."

"This explains a great deal," said Lady Ernstone, sadly. "From a little child, Beatrice has been subject to fearful fits of jealousy. After my own children had died as babies, and she had become the recognized heiress of the Towers, I thought her jealousy had died out; but 'tis clear I have been mistaken."

"You think she was jealous of Nelly?"

"I don't know what to think. Remember, Mr. Norton, Beatrice is our only child; don't ask me to be too hard on her. That she has willfully deceived me respecting your attentions, and tampered with your letters, I cannot deny; but I will not believe she could invent such a terrible charge against her own friend."

Mr. Norton shook his head.

"A jealous woman will do any thing, Lady Ernstone. She is not accountable for her actions; is, indeed, for the time being, mad."

"Doctor Carr says it is a common fancy with patients recovering from a nervous disorder to believe that those around them are seeking to poison them."

"That would tell in Nelly's favor. I mean to go down to Belton to-day. I cannot rest away."

"I wish I could accompany you, but I must stay with Lord Ernstone; he is not in danger, but we are very anxious about him. A hint of this might seriously affect his recovery. I sent down a solicitor yesterday; and my maid Simmonds, a very superior woman, knows as much

as I do of the events of that dreadful day. I have done all I can."

At his request, she told him the particulars we already know; every word seemed to strengthen the accusation. Hugh bent his head in silent thought.

"The doctor is no fool, I suppose?"

"He is considered a very clever man. He is not quite a gentleman, and that may have prejudiced me against him."

"He must have been deceived. There could not have been poison in the drink."

Lady Ernstone shook her head.

"I don't think he was mistaken. He would hardly risk his professional reputation by saying so, unless he were tolerably certain. I believe the arsenic was there just as he says."

"Then who put it there?"

"That is what I implored Mr. Gresham to find out yesterday. He seemed very hopeful."

Mr. Norton did not feel so. A dim, fixed certainty was stealing on him that the person who dropped the arsenic into the *tisane* was no other than Beatrice herself. If so, discovery was almost impossible; and, oh, if it came, what an awful blow it would be for the Ernstones!

"Is it not strange," asked my lady, "that my husband should be ill just now? I think, if he were about, I should feel much more hopeful."

"What could he do more than others?"

"He has a great deal of influence with Beatrice. If the affair goes so far as a trial, it appears to me the way she gives her evidence must have a great deal to do with the result. At present she is fiercely vindictive. I had hoped her father might have softened her."

"May I try if I can soften her?"

Lady Ernstone shook her head.

"I don't think you will move her."

It was a sad interview altogether. It had brought home to Lady Ernstone more of her daughter's true character than she had ever known; and had shown Hugh Norton that in Nelly's defense he had to conquer the hundred facts brought forward as proofs of guilt by a woman's jealousy. If he rescued his darling, it would be alone and unaided. How could he press the Ernstones to help him, when the doing so would disclose such bitter truths concerning their only child?

He went straight from that interview with her ladyship to the Charing Cross Terminus, and took a ticket for Belton.

How many things had happened since he and Charley had set out from that very station a few weeks before! It seemed to Hugh that his life's best hopes had budded in that brief space. Whether or not she ever became his wife, he would never regret that he had known and loved Nelly Adair.

He drove from the station to the hotel where Lady Ernstone had said Mr. Gresham meant to stay. Not a soul was to be seen; the streets were empty. A sleepy waiter told him Mr. Gresham was at the Town Hall. The examination was to begin at two o'clock.

One pang of pity for his darling, and Hugh presented himself at the Town Hall.

How he got in he never rightly knew. He made a lavish use of a golden key, and finally got a seat not so very far from the bench.

He had barely accomplished this when they led in the slight girlish form he knew so well.

The August sun shone on her nut-brown hair. She looked as much a lady, standing there in her plain dress, a prisoner in a felon's dock, as ever she had looked in dainty evening costume at the Towers.

Hugh Norton bent his head. Not for worlds would he have disturbed her calm by the sight of him. He need not have feared; Nelly gave no glance to the sea of faces, whose eyes were fixed on her. She looked steadily on the ground; her clear voice never faltered as she answered to her name, "Ellen Adair."

The charge was then read over; the prosecuting lawyer made some remarks, chiefly on

the enormity of attempting to murder Miss Ernstone; then the first witness was called.

John Gibson, surgeon. He gave his evidence firmly; the cross-examination failed to shake it, only he admitted that patients suffering from nervous ailments were sometimes subject to delusions or morbid fancies. This was the only point gained by the defense, and it was almost neutralized by the surgeon's positive statement that Miss Ernstone was not a nervous subject.

Other witnesses followed, Beatrice the chief of them. Never had she looked so beautiful. Like the prisoner, she was dressed in black. It was noticed that she never once turned her eyes toward the dock. Long afterward that scene was remembered in Belton. The two fair girls, one the accuser, the other the accused; both so young, both so richly dowered by nature.

Popular feeling ran in favor of Beatrice.

Hugh Norton thought they looked like two angels—the spirit of good, and the spirit of evil.

Miss Ernstone was the most important witness for the prosecution; she gave her answers firmly and clearly. Every point told.

Mr. Gresham called but one witness—Simmonds. She testified to Beatrice's illness, saying it left her with many strange fancies; among others, that of insisting on opening the letter-bag herself. Miss Adair nursed her like a sister. "Were the young ladies on good terms?" they asked her. "Of course they were. Miss Adair was one of those gentle creatures that had a kind word for every one."

That was all. Then, after a brief conversation with his brother magistrates, Mr. Grant cleared his throat, and with all due formula committed Ellen Adair to take her trial at the next assizes for the attempt to murder Beatrice Ernstone by poison.

There was perfect silence through the court as the sentence was pronounced.

Then Mr. Gresham said quietly, "I am authorized by Lady Ernstone to offer bail to any amount for Miss Adair."

Mr. Grant barely let him finish.

"We could not think of such a thing; quite out of the question."

At that moment the prisoner raised her blue eyes, and they met Hugh Norton's anxious gaze. Those who watched her saw her tremble; another instant, and she had fallen senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER IX.

MAD.

"The ruling passion, be it what it will—
The ruling passion conquers reason still."

THE day after that sad scene, in a narrow, gloomily cell in Belton prison, Ellen Adair was seated, her white hands locked nervously together, her blue eyes raised toward the Heaven people said she had so sinned against.

Mr. Gresham had been with her nearly all the morning. Very kind and gentle had he been, but made no attempt to hide from her that many difficulties were in their path.

"The real obstacle to proving your innocence, Miss Adair," he declared, "is Beatrice Ernstone. Gibson is only her tool. The charge originated with the mistress. If we could only detect some flaw in her evidence, all might be well."

"The proofs seem terrible to me," she answered. "I wonder any one can believe me innocent."

"The proofs are strong, but they fail in one point. No one can trace poison to your possession. No one remembers your buying any. Arsenic is a very dangerous thing, Miss Adair. People can't get hold of it indiscriminately. It is quite certain some one at the Towers had arsenic in their possession; the question is, who?"

"Beatrice had some in her illuminating box," said Ellen Adair, suddenly. "I remember now she used to mix some of her colors with it."

"I wish you had remembered this sooner," replied the lawyer. "We can do nothing now until the trial, five weeks hence."

"Mr. Gresham," said the girl, resolutely, "I want you to tell me the truth. If it comes to the worst, what can they do to me?"

"We must not let it come to the worst, Miss Adair."

"But if it does—please tell me?"

"It would be penal servitude; or, perhaps, if the jury recommended you to mercy, a year or two's imprisonment."

"It would kill me!" she breathed.

"Ay; but don't think of it. I think we have a clew now. I feel much more hopeful than I did yesterday."

And now he was gone, and Nelly sat alone.

How very slowly the days passed! What would she be like when those five dreary weeks had dragged out their course?

It seemed to Nelly there was one chance of escape which no one had thought of—she might die! If ever sorrow killed, surely hers would! Her lover gone, the betrothed of another, deprived of her good name, and imprisoned on suspicion of having attempted to murder her friend!

The door opened and the tall figure of a man entered.

Nelly did not rise. She never even looked up. Of course, it was only one of the prison officials.

Lord Ernstone was ill in London. No one else would come to see her.

"Nelly!"

It was her lover—no, not hers now, but Beatrice's!

A great sorrow was written on his face.

She made no answer. She was thinking how very bitter it was to see him now that he belonged to Beatrice.

"My darling, won't you speak to me?"

Outside patrolled the prison warder. The visit was limited to half an hour. It was all too short for Hugh.

"Nelly!" he implored; "speak to me!"

"Did Beatrice send you?" she asked, at last.

"Has she forgiven me her imagined wrong?"

"I have never seen Beatrice to speak to since the evening of our excursion to Briarleigh Woods. I hear she has intercepted my letters to you, darling, and even told you I was false. Nelly, I warned you she would try to make mischief between us; I little thought how soon she would commence her wicked work. Nelly, all that I said to you in Briarleigh Woods I meant, darling; you are my affianced wife, and no power of Beatrice Ernstone can separate us!"

"You make me happy," she murmured, "only to hear that. When I believed you had forsaken me, Hugh, I thought I should go mad. I had but one hope—that I might die!"

"And now you will live for me?"

"Think of the disgrace!" she whispered.

"Oh, Hugh, it would be wrong to hold you to your promise now! Think of what I am!"

"You are a martyr!" he cried, hotly. "Beatrice has injured you cruelly; but I am here to protect you. I will prove your innocence; the people who have slandered you shall confess their error, and then we will be married!"

She shook her head.

"You were there in court yesterday, Hugh; I saw you. You heard the awful proofs they have gathered against me, till, as I listened, I almost began to ask myself whether I had not really been guilty of the crime with which I was charged."

"Nelly," said Hugh, fondly, "if this trouble had not come, and you and I had been married, you would have helped me to bear each burden that came; would have shared my griefs as well as my joys, would you not?"

"I would have borne anything for you!"

"Then, darling, try to endure this now. I have every hope that this trouble is but a passing cloud; Beatrice Ernstone is not all-powerful. I have five weeks in which to unravel the mystery of her treachery. I do not think I shall fail. Then, my dear one, you shall hold

your head erect, and triumph over your accusers, and I shall claim your promise."

He put one arm round her, and drew the tired head down on his shoulder. Only nineteen, and what a load of trouble had come to her!

Hugh kissed the fair face fondly, and resolved that, once his wife, Heaven helping him, she should never know another sorrow. Very, very bitter were his thoughts of Beatrice. If she had thought Nelly's disgrace would kill his love, soon would she discover her miserable mistake. Hugh Norton had never loved his darling better than now, when he held her in his arms in that gloomy prison cell!

That same day, later on, when the August sun was sinking, he walked toward the Towers. He intended to seek an explanation with Beatrice Ernstone; believed that the whole charge against Nelly was that jealous girl's invention. Before he set to work, step by step, to bring her sin home to her, he wanted to give her an opportunity of confessing it, if the truth were as he expected. Her wicked perfidy made public, a crushing blow must fall on her father and mother; for their sakes he would spare her all he could.

There was no difficulty in seeing her; the footman had evidently received instructions, for he showed Mr. Norton at once to the pretty boudoir where his young mistress usually spent her time.

Beatrice, dressed in an elaborate evening toilet, came forward in eager welcome, her large eyes sparkling with excitement. The hand which, before the servant, he barely touched, burnt with fever; her color was unnaturally bright. Beautiful she must ever be, but the painfully fierce, wild look on her face struck Hugh Norton the moment he saw her.

He took a chair near her. The footman left them.

"I was with your mother yesterday. I promised her to call and tell you Lord Ernstone was not in any danger."

"What brought you back to Belton?" asked the heiress, suddenly. "I saw you at the Town Hall yesterday."

"I came because I heard of the accusation against your cousin."

"My cousin?"

"Miss Adair."

"What is Ellen Adair to you?" she asked, fiercely. "You are mine! You swore three years ago that you loved me! You are mine—shall have no other wife!"

Hugh Norton felt his blood run cold. There was something so terrible in the expression of her countenance. He remembered the vague suspicion that had come to him on the morning of the picnic. Could it be true, after all? Was she really insane?

"Beatrice," he said, soothingly, almost as though speaking to a little child, "Ellen Adair will one day be my wife. Why have you taken the letters I wrote to her? Why have you done all in your power to injure her?"

But the first part of his sentence alone interested his listener.

"She shall never be your wife! She can't now; I have taken care of that. You dare not marry a convict! A pretty mistress she would make for Norton Priory!"

"Beatrice," repeated Hugh, "do you know that you are talking very strangely?"

"Is it strange that I should love you? You loved me, too, long ago. Hugh, I drove you from me, but I loved you; all the long while you were in India I waited for you. When you came home, and Nelly Adair tried to win you away from me, I hated her!"

"Poor child!" he said, sternly, thinking of his innocent love. "No doubt you made her life a hard one."

"But it is over now," resumed Beatrice, complacently. "Nelly is in prison, and you are going to marry me."

There was something in her words so strange, that Hugh rose to end the interview. He went down-stairs.

"Can I see Simmonds?" he asked the footman. "Lady Ernstone intrusted me with a message for her."

When the woman came, Hugh shut the door, as Lady Ernstone had done only two days before.

"In Heaven's name," he said, abruptly, to the startled maid, "what is the matter with Miss Ernstone? It is an awful thing to ask, but is she crazed?"

The woman appeared in no way surprised at his question.

"Mr. Norton, sir, the doubt's been on me these two days, ever since my lady went away. Miss Beatrice sits half her time like one that's dazed, then by fits and starts she'll break out laughing. Last night she frightened us so, that Marie and I sat up with her. How she got through the scene at the Town Hall I can't tell. They say she gave her evidence wonderfully, and it was that which most injured Miss Adair."

"I have just come from Miss Ernstone," said Hugh. "Do not mention it to the household, but it is my belief that she has lost her senses."

"But so sudden, sir? What could have caused it? And, oh, what a trouble for my poor lady?"

Hugh might have told her that jealousy, when not resisted, often becomes insanity, but he did not think it necessary; said only, "I shall return to London to-morrow, and see Lady Ernstone."

"She won't leave my lord, sir, if he is as ill as she thought for."

"At least, she will send advice. You must watch Miss Ernstone constantly till a doctor has seen her. I fear there is very little doubt of her malady."

"She keeps up there, sir, where you saw her. That room and her bedroom she doesn't stir out of. She was better yesterday in the afternoon. I'm glad you've come, sir; I dared not write to my lady; and yet I felt uneasy."

"Simmonds," suggested Mr. Norton suddenly, "if it be as we fear, that this poor girl is really insane, there can be no doubt that she herself put the arsenic in the drink."

"I should not be surprised, sir. Miss Adair left the tumbler full five minutes with Miss Beatrice while she went for more sugar. Do you think the Doctor will come soon, sir? asking your pardon, but the responsibility is more than I could bear for long. It's not like a common illness, you know, sir, anything wrong with the mind."

"Do your best," answered Hugh, encouragingly. "The doctor will be down by to-morrow night at latest; till then you must keep a close watch over Miss Ernstone."

"You'll break it gently to my lady, sir?" urged the maid, respectfully. "She is not strong herself, and this last week has just been trouble upon trouble."

"I will do all I can, but—" At that moment the door was pushed open, and Beatrice Ernstone entered.

"Why are you talking to her?" she asked, angrily. "This girl does not know anything about Nelly Adair. She can't tell who did it."

"Miss Beatrice," urged Simmonds, "indeed, indeed, you'd be better in bed! Let Marie help you to undress."

Beatrice sat down on the sofa.

"I shall stay here with him, Simmonds. He is my husband before Heaven. We have been engaged these three years; we might have been married, only that hateful Nelly came between us."

Poor Simmonds wrung her hands. What was she to do; no one but herself and Marie knew of the misfortune threatening the heiress. She did not dare to summon the other servants to her assistance.

"What am I to do, sir?" she asked Hugh. "Please try to make her hear reason."

"Beatrice," said Mr. Norton, in a calm, steady tone, which impressed the wretched girl with a sense of authority; "you must go

to bed at once; I insist upon it. You have been very ill already, you know."

She looked at him in doubt. Her eyes were losing their wildness.

"I am very tired; I think I should like to go if you will take me. I cannot walk alone."

He gave her his arm, and she clung to it, tottering like an invalid. She seemed terribly weak now that the excitement had left her.

Gently and kindly Hugh led her up stairs to her own door; gave her in charge to her maid and the faithful Simmonds. Then he went slowly back to the drawing-room, and then out into the stillness of the August night.

Most thoroughly was Norton convinced that the beautiful woman who had been his first love, who had heaped such cruel accusations on Nelly Adair, was attacked by the most awful malady which can assail the human race.

Mad! hopelessly mad was the woman whom her own relation had called "cruel, though beautiful."

There was a break of light in Nelly's future; but Hugh could not rejoice, so terrible was the calamity by which his love would be rescued. How was he to break to the gentle wife, watching by her husband's sick-bed, that the most awful shadow, save that brought by crime, had fallen on their name, and that they were worse than childless?

CHAPTER X.

LIGHT AFTER CLOUDS.

"Till danger's troubled night departs,
And the star of peace returns."

WITHOUT another interview either with the prisoner in Belton Prison, or the hapless heiress of the Towers, Hugh Norton left for London. It was only two days since he had seen Lady Ernstone. He had left her full of trouble, and was about to add to her burden. How greatly he shrunk from the visit!

To his surprise he did not find her alone. A grave, portly-looking man was with her. Lady Ernstone introduced him as Doctor Carr, an old friend of the family.

Then she turned to Hugh, sadly.

"I know what you have come to tell me. I read in the paper that Nelly was committed for trial. Doctor Carr, who has been in my husband's confidence for years, holds the firm opinion that our poor Beatrice must have been wandering in her mind when she made the accusation. You will talk more freely without me, so I will leave you. I shall hope to see you later."

With a look of unspeakable relief, Mr. Norton opened the door for her; then came back to the table, and sat down near the physician.

"The case is plain enough, sir," said the latter, gravely. "Beatrice Ernstone's mother died a raving maniac. The taint must be in the daughter's blood, and she herself dropped the poison into the glass. For twenty-two years Lord Ernstone and I have kept the dreary secret. The world condoled with him on his daughter's refusing splendid offers. The real fact was, had she wished to accept them, he would not have allowed it. Her mother was insane at this girl's birth; sooner or later the inherited malady must have shown itself."

"Surely her mother was Lady Ernstone?"

"Not the lady who has just left us. The unhappy girl is only her step-daughter. Mr. Norton, Miss Adair must not be sacrificed to the jealousy of a lunatic; only, for the parents' sake, I would gladly keep the matter as private as possible."

Hugh's answer was to tell him the scene he had witnessed the night before.

"In my opinion she is hopelessly mad already," he concluded.

"I will go down with you to-night. Poor girl, not yet twenty-three, what a life for her!"

"I wish you would tell me about her mother."

"Nothing is simpler, but it is a sad story. She was just as beautiful as is her daughter now. When sane, a sweeter woman never lived. Lord Ernstone married her against the

wishes of her family, who, however, took good care to conceal the reason of their objection. For a few months all went well; then Lady Margaret conceived a violent jealousy of some lady friends. She was insane at intervals afterward until her death."

"And she died young?"

"Yes; the paroxysms of madness wore away her strength. At intervals she was perfectly sane, and at such times begged of Lord Ernstone that if her child should live to womanhood she might never be married, that she might not entail the curse on another generation."

"What a mercy for her husband that Lady Margaret died!"

"Ay, he is happier far in his second marriage. A good woman is the present Lady Ernstone. It's not her fault that her step-daughter has turned out so ill."

"I suppose the taint being in the blood, it was certain to show itself sooner or later?"

"Decidedly."

"And surely no blame could attach to the person who unconsciously awoke her jealousy."

"None whatever. These poor creatures are jealous without rhyme or reason."

The truth was gently broken to Lady Ernstone. Perhaps Dr. Carr had already prepared her; for she did not seem so much alarmed as Hugh had anticipated.

She urged them to do all in their power for Beatrice, and as much as possible to conceal the shadow that had fallen on the Towers.

Simmonds met the gentlemen in the grand entrance hall.

"She is very ill, sir. I have spread it through the house that she has a relapse of the other illness with which she was affected lately. I said, as her mamma didn't put faith in Mr. Gibson, she would send a doctor from London."

"You remember me, Simmonds?"

"Yes, sir; I've seen you many times. You'll do all you can for my poor young lady?"

"For her parents' sake. I had better see her at once."

He went up-stairs. They showed him to the door, and he went in alone.

What did he see? Beatrice Ernstone sitting on the floor; her glorious hair, into which she was twining flowers, falling down over her shoulders. She thought it her wedding morning, and that she was Hugh Norton's bride.

"He loves me now," she said, gayly, to the physician. "He has quite forgotten about Nelly. He and I are to be very happy, while she is shut up somewhere."

Poor Beatrice! However cruel and pitiless she had been, however much she had deserved her fate, no one could be but sorry to see her thus. Her intellect destroyed, her life blighted, her very beauty now serving but to make her a subject for deeper pity! What was beauty without the light of reason?

While Doctor Carr sat in the boudoir with the sad wreck of what had been once a bright, beautiful woman, Hugh Norton was not idle down-stairs. When he had left the physician, Simmonds came to him.

"Marie would like to speak to you, sir; only she is afraid you will be angry with her."

"This is not a time for anger," he said, gently. "The house is too full of trouble for that. Send her in."

The pretty French girl soon stood before him, her hands playing with her dainty apron in her embarrassment.

"Did you wish to see me?" asked Hugh, kindly.

"Yes. Monsieur is here as Milord—is he not?"

"As Lord Ernstone's friend, anything you would wish to tell him I shall be glad to hear."

"Is it true as they say that my sweet Made-moiselle is really insane?"

"I am afraid it is quite true."

"Then, whatever she do, no one can punish her any more?"

Norton shook his head.

"She is not responsible for her actions—knows not right from wrong, poor thing."

"And if I, monsieur, tell you something that I would have liked to say before only for my young lady, will you be angry with me?"

"No. I understand you have kept silence only for Miss Ernstone's sake."

"That is all," declared Marie. "I so sorry when the poor Miss Nelly is taken to the prison; but Miss Beatrice was my young lady, and so I keep tranquil."

"Then you know who put the poison in that drink?" asked Norton, eagerly.

"But—yes, sir. That same morning, Made-moiselle sent me to find her paints, and she takes one little parcel out. Later on, when Miss Nelly go for the sugar, I see Miss Beatrice shake some white powder in the *tisane*. I see it, sir, and from then I have been very much afraid. I know not what to do, Miss Nelly in great trouble; but I love Miss Beatrice too much to tell."

Norton wrote down her statement just as she had given it. Then he read it over to her, and she signed it. His heart felt lighter; the clouds seemed rolling from Nelly's future.

Dr. Carr came down soon afterward.

"It is hopeless," he said to Mr. Norton. "It is a case of complete insanity."

"What shall we do?"

"I shall go to the magistrates to-morrow, and tell them they have committed Miss Adair for trial on the evidence of a lunatic. I should think they would set her at liberty at once."

"Especially if you give them this." And Hugh gave the physician Marie's statement, properly signed and witnessed.

"You take great interest in the accused young lady."

"And so I ought to; Miss Adair is my promised wife."

"Your brother will have a heavy heart when the news reaches him, I fear. I have heard he thought to marry Beatrice Ernstone."

"It was his dearest wish. Ah, well, it will be a bitter blow to him; but better it should fall now than later on when she had become his wife."

"I fancy Lord Ernstone would have told the truth if there had been any serious question of her marriage. He kept the secret very jealously even from his wife."

"What a crushing trial this will be for him!"

"But not an unexpected one. All her life long he has been dreading something of the sort."

Four days later, Mr. Norton and Doctor Carr entered the cell where Ellen Adair was wearing away her sweet young life. Hugh went to her, and took her in his arms.

"My dear young lady," began the doctor, "you have had much to endure, but your troubles are over now. You are free, and Mr. Gibson has apologized handsomely for his suspicions. Mr. Norton and I have come to tell you the good news, and to escort you to join Lord and Lady Ernstone in London."

"And Beatrice?" asked Nelly.

"Beatrice must stay at the Towers; she is not very well just now. Lady Ernstone wants you in town; we must take you to her to-day, she says." And Doctor Carr, with a consideration for lovers' feelings elderly gentlemen in general would do well to imitate, left the two alone.

"Darling Nelly," said Hugh, fondly, "every one acknowledges their mistake; all danger is past. Henceforward, dear, it shall be mine to guard you from all sorrow."

"Oh, this happiness!" she said.

"We will be married very soon," decided Mr. Norton, usurping the bride's privilege with a most authoritative air; "before the year is out, certainly. I have not got a town house, but I shall take a villa at St. John's Wood, that I may remember constantly the days when first I knew my fairy."

"Oh, Hugh, what a deal has happened lately! Five weeks ago I had never even seen you, except in that old time long ago. It is only a fortnight yet since we went to Briarleigh Woods!"

"Do you regret the bargain you made in Briarleigh Woods, young lady?"

"No, Hugh; do you?"

"I repent nothing that gives me a fairy to share my life and home."

Hugh was honestly sorry for Beatrice. By-and-by, he and Nelly would lament her sad fate together; but these first few moments of reunion belonged only to Nelly, and he would not cloud them by mentioning anything sad.

"Are you nearly ready?" asked Doctor Carr, poking his head in. "The carriage has been waiting nearly an hour. You seem too fond of your prison to care to leave it, Miss Adair."

"We are ready now," and Hugh gave his arm to his betrothed. He led her gently out to the carriage, the physician jumped in after them, and they started for Belton Station, a glad content filling the hearts of the lovers, a very sure promise of happiness in their future, because they would begin married life with that best of all capitals, mutual love.

It was a sad meeting between Nelly and Lady Ernstone; it could not have been otherwise. The peeress rejoiced in her young friend's freedom; sympathized in her perfect felicity; but her heart was sore as she thought of Ernstone Towers and the blight that had fallen on Beatrice's life.

Then began halycon days for Nelly Adair. Hugh Norton's chambers were not far from Lord Ernstone's town house, and the lovers were together every day. Hugh was anxious for a speedy wedding, but Nelly declared they must not speak of it until her guardian was restored to health.

Lord Ernstone's was not such a very long illness, after all. In the September days, Doctor Carr pronounced him convalescent. His wife herself broke to him the news of Beatrice, softening the terrible blow, by every means in her power.

"From the hour of her birth I have expected this," sighed Lord Ernstone; "yet, oh, Lena, it is hard! My beautiful Beatrice, I would sooner have seen her in her coffin! And yet I can be thankful the truth has been discovered. If poor Ellen Adair had been really convicted of the supposed crime, I should never have forgiven myself for not warning you of the doom with which Beatrice has all her life been threatened."

"Claude, can you bear the sight of Nelly? Does it not seem hard to you that she should be well and happy, while our poor child—"

He shook his head.

"Nelly Adair comes of a long line of true men and good women; the taint was in Beatrice's blood. For generations in her mother's family there has always been one who was insane."

"It was cruel to let you marry her."

"They did try to warn me; but I would not be persuaded, Lena."

In spite of her twenty years of wifehood, an eager, questioning look crossed Lena's face.

"Claude, did you love her very much?"

He took his wife's hand, and held it close in both of his.

"I loved her wildly, madly, Lena, with the fierce passion of youth. I love you, dear, with the devotion of manhood! My hope of bliss with Margaret was all a dream; with you, Lena, my happiness has been, and still is, a blest reality."

"You will not think me foolish or wicked?—but Claude, I have sometimes felt envious of the dead!"

"You need not, dear; I loved you as my own life when I married you, Lena; and love you still the same now, when time has bent my step, and lined your hair with silver. Now Beatrice is in a measure lost to us, we must try and make a daughter of Nelly Adair. Failing my poor afflicted child, she is the true heiress of all I possess."

"She will not remain with us long," replied my lady, with a smile. "Hugh Norton is only awaiting your recovery to ask you to give him Nelly; he loves her dearly, Claude."

"I can give Nelly away with a light heart; no sight could have been sadder to me than

Beatrice's wedding. I was often thankful that she never favored any one of her admirers."

Lady Ernstone's lips were opened to tell him otherwise; but she closed them again. Better that he should remain in ignorance—that he should never know the romance of his daughter's life—a romance whose ending had certainly hastened the doom inherited from her unhappy mother.

The gardens of Ernstone Towers, one fair July afternoon. A lady, almost a girl, dressed in simple white, is walking up and down, holding by the hand a fine little fellow of two years old; they hear the sound of steps, and the mother says, "Look, Claude, here comes papa; run and meet him!"

The baby boy essays to toddle, then comes back to his mother's side, and soon a stately, handsome man clasps his wife and child in a close embrace.

"I thought you would come to-day, though Lady Ernstone said I ought not to expect you so soon."

"And why did you think I should come to-day, Nelly?" he asks, fondly.

"Because, four years ago to-day, I sat in these gardens expecting you. Ah, Hugh, I little thought then of all you were to bring me!"

He smiles; then his face grows sad.

"Charley sent a hundred messages, but I could not persuade him to come with me; he promises us a visit at the Priory in the autumn."

"I do not think, Hugh, he ever will come here."

"No; it reminds him too much of Beatrice."

"Will he never forget her, Hugh?"

"Perhaps, in time; not yet awhile, I fear."

And husband and wife both think of a new-made grave in Belton churchyard, where summer flowers bloom over all that was mortal of Beatrice Ernstone!

"She was too beautiful to be forgotten lightly," murmurs Nelly.

"Ay," replies her husband, looking at her with deep love shining in his face; "she was very beautiful, Nelly—beautiful, though cruel!"

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